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Would you like to know when the next issue of Deep Magic is released? Sign up for our mailing list for free. You will also be notified periodically when Deep Magic has special news or offers.

If you would like to support Deep Magic, consider purchasing a membership. Details can be found here on our website.

If you are familiar with the internet at all, you know how common dead and broken links are. If you ever try to access a link from this e-zine and it no longer works, don't give up. Go to http://www.deep-magic.net where you will find archives of previous issues. As we catch dead and broken links, we will make a note on the corrections page for that issue. If that is the case, you will find the corrected URL there. If we have not already caught the defective link, please let us know, and we will do all we can to track down an updated URL for the information you seek. However, please keep in mind that sometimes content is taken down and is gone forever.

# June 2006

Dear Readers,

When we set off to create Deep Magic over four years ago, we had no idea the adventure we were getting ourselves into. We have accomplished a great deal in the last 48 issues. We've interviewed some of the best writers in the genre. We've chatted with screenwriters, editors, and artists. We've received praise and sometimes criticism (mostly praise, though) from our readers and the public in general. We are proud of what we've accomplished.

When we've struggled financially in the past, you came through and made it possible to keep going. When we decided to start paying our writers and artists, you supported us. But we have noticed some signals that maybe everything isn't as rosy as we thought. Our e-mail subscriber base stopped growing a while ago. The participation in the message board has dwindled, also. More importantly, our fund drive last month was, well, rather lackluster.

Which leaves us at the brink at an uncomfortable crossroads. We've had to discuss whether to keep on publishing Deep Magic or to shut it down.

This is not an easy decision to make, nor do we consider it lightly. Over the last month, we received $103 from our readers to support us for the next year (out of the $3000 we asked for). We've given it our best for many years now to bring you a quality product and hoped that you would value it and vote with your wallets to support our vision for Deep Magic could be. For the most part, only a fraction of our readers have ever contributed. The generosity of a few was enough to keep things going in the past. It's not enough to keep us going in the future.

So, we have decided that this will likely be our final issue. We figure it is probably too optimistic to expect a sudden outpouring of financial support, but we will keep the Paypal account open until June 10. You are all busy and many of you might have forgotten our plea. We will refund any donations we have received by then if it's not enough to fund our vision of the future (including those who donated since May 1). We'll also update our message board with a running tally if things pick up suddenly, and we promise to send an e-mail with the final decision one way or the other.

What happens next? Well, if we do stop publishing new issues, we will most likely open up our old issues and keep them on the server for a while. We've already paid the web-hosting fees, so there is nothing that would prevent us from doing so. We would also keep the message board going, but we would stop accepting new submissions.

From all of us here at Deep Magic, we have appreciated walking this road with you. Some of you have joined us in the last few months. Some of you have been with us from the beginning. Thank you for your kind words and support. Your encouragement has been greatly appreciated and has helped make Deep Magic so rewarding over these last four years.

If you have questions, or want to discuss all this with us, visit this forum topic.

All the best,
The Editors

**Safe Places for Minds to Wander**

# Annual Subscription Drive

**THIS NOTICE CONTINUED FROM THE MAY 2006 ISSUE. SEE THE EDITOR'S NOTE FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

Back in June 2002, Deep Magic was born. The support of our readers and our dedicated staff of volunteers has kept us growing since that time. At the end of May in 2002, we had around 90 subscribers to our mailing list. Now we have over 1400. In the beginning, we had hundreds of downloads a month. Over the last publishing year, we've had over 19,000 downloads. We would like to keep the momentum growing, and the only way to do that is with your support.

The greatest benefit from supporting Deep Magic is the tremendous satisfaction you feel in helping making this a valuable resource to writers and readers all around the world. The only source of funding our expenses is member support. You are so important to us! The funds we receive during our pledge drive primarily determine how many issues we will be able to publish during the year.

**Goals for 2006!**

Last year, we started paying our artists and authors a flat rate of $25 for their work. At Deep Magic, we would love to attract even better talent to our pages. A year ago, we took a leap of faith in our readers to support this strategy, and it worked out great. We gained enough contributions and enough new paid memberships to pay the bills last year. The decision to pay our authors and artists resulted in our submissions going up enormously. We were flooded with more and higher quality submissions. Thanks to our resident computer geek Steven for automating in the submission process, we survived the deluge. So in 2006, we're going to lay it on the line again with three goals.

**Goal #1: Double author and artist payments**
**Goal #2: Make each issue bigger**
**Goal #3: Add more premium content**

Starting in June 2006, we plan to double the payment for our authors and artists - **$50**. And we would like to squeeze one more story in per issue and provide new premium content that only paying members get access to.

This means **we need at least 150 paying members this year**. For those of you who have been enjoying Deep Magic for free, isn't it time to finally be a member? If you keep coming back month after month to read great new stories, articles, book reviews, and interviews with the best in the genre, as well as many of the debut authors, it is time to make a commitment. Look at it this way:

**Why become a member?**

For the price of one hardback novel (even a discounted one at Amazon, if you're frugal like us) you get a lot:

- Seven serialized novels
- Over 1300 pages of short stories
- Interviews with Guy Gavriel Kay, Steven Erikson, Carol Berg, George RR Martin, Robert Jordan (to name a few)
- Articles from Robin Hobb, Cecilia Dart-Thorton, David Farland, Terry Brooks, Mike Stackpole, Naomi Kritzer, Greg Keyes (and many more)
- The satisfaction that you've helped there be more "safe places for minds to wander"

You will also get access to premium content:

- Deep Magic Special Editions (annual issues made up of stories from invited authors just for you)
- E-books: starting with ***Wrath of Aster***, the sequel to Jeff Wheeler 's fantasy novel, as well as the original ***Tears of Minya***. (Posting date TBA.)

**Discount**

Special discount: **If you pay for a membership during our pledge drive (May through June 2006), you will get a 20% discount . If you currently have a paid membership that hasn't expired, you can sign on for another year with the discount.**

**Membership Benefits**

- Access to all back issues of Deep Magic
- Access to our Premium Content (members only): Special Edition issues and eBooks
- Your own web log (or 'blog ') on the Deep Magic boards
- Membership is $25 per year

Since we are a non-profit company, we accept donations of any amount. Your support helps us pay our authors and artists for their work, pay the webhosting fees we incur running such a large website, and pay for software upgrades that are critical to running the e-zine. None of our staff is paid (unless we publish one of their stories). So the amount of memberships and contributions we receive during this pledge drive will directly determine how many more issues and stories we will be able to publish over the next year.

To pledge your support for Deep Magic, you can join with a membership through our message boards. You can also make a donation of any amount through Paypal to this address: pledge@deep-magic.net.

Thank you!

The staff at Deep Magic

# Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. All are welcome to participate. We select a small number of submissions each month for publication (we don't offer compensation for challenges).

To submit a challenge, go to our submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. Please note the deadline date.

## June 2006 Writing Challenge
### Entries due July 10, 2006

We're taking a month off from the writing challenges.

## Selections from the April 2005 Challenge

***Ambitious?***
***Conditional Absolution***
***Hunger***

The above stories were selected from the April challenge, which was to use specific events from your life to craft a scene or story.

## Don't forget the May challenge due June 10:

*Writers are storytellers at heart and how one tells a story is quite a craft. A device that writers often use is employing a narrator to share the story. This can be done through first person, but it can also be done through third person, as well. And since most people only see the good in themselves, even a true villain can sound sympathetic to himself. Your challenge this month is to create a narrator who unwittingly reveals, through many subtle ways (language, details, contradictions, prejudices), that their judgment is too subjective and cannot be trusted as fact. If done successfully, your reader will begin to doubt what they are being told and try to piece together the facts on their own. Make it a brief scene and keep it to 500 words.*

# Ambitious?

## By Luke J Maucione

"It just isn't fair!"

"Fair, Nicholas? What is fair in war anyway?"

Nicholas Glaston, son of the second Earl of Glaston, looked away from his comrade in arms. He gripped the shaft of his spear with the desire to splinter the wood.

"I should be at the gate leading the forward defense of the city. It is my right—but not only that, I've earned it. I've been through all the training the war wizards could want. I've read the teachings of our political leaders and studied the best strategies of defense from the Captain. I can take most of the army one-on-one if I have to in battle, what more could they want?"

"Battle is serious business," said Nicholas' companion. "You told me the Captain thought you had little experience in warfare. Perhaps they are just being cautious."

"Caution be damned, I am the son of an Earl! My people need to know I can lead them. I can't do that back here in the second wall and leading the second line of defense."

Shouts from the front gate came to them as the assault on the city began anew. Bright flashes lit the early evening dusk above the walls. Suddenly war cries from the wall changed to screams of terror.

Nicholas dashed to the edge of the rampart in time to see the back door of the front gate open. Two men carried a body in their arms. Another soldier left the back door, stumbled forward and fell, his hardened leather armor still smoldering.

One of the pair shouted a garbled command and the other soldier left him and ran toward the Captain's position. The remaining soldier carried on, dragging the body doggedly across the yard and beneath the wall where Nicholas stood.

"Soldier," called out Nicholas, "what is the status of the defense at the front gate?"

"Their war wizards have something new, sir—balls of fire in the shape of serpents. We… we didn't know they could do that—our wizards were unprepared. Half the garrison is lost."

"Where is the garrison leader, soldier?" Nicholas asked weakly.

The soldier rotated the body to show the wounded man's scorched face. All that remained was one eye that seemed to dart back and forth like a cornered animal.

"One of the serpent fires struck him during the first attack. He still lives, though by the barest of threads."

"I…I see, um, carry on soldier."

Footsteps approached from the stairs and a runner appeared, gasping for breath.

"Nicholas, the Captain says you are to be the garrison leader at the front gate. He orders you to hasten to fulfill your new post."

Nicholas looked at the flashes continuing to light up the sky. This time he grasped the shaft to steady himself, to keep from trembling.

"Your desire is granted, Earl of Glaston," his comrade said, "you've been promoted."

# Conditional Absolution

## By A.M. Stickel

Writing in my head every waking second is my main obsession. Second only to writing is my fascination with every aspect of the spiritual. I am convinced that hell is real...and, may God forgive me, that life is hell. For, I have become an infidel.

Last week I had finally found enough courage to see my old confessor, the Abbé Bertrand. This modern, face-to-face version of the sacrament has kept me from its frequent use. Yet, he looked at me with such compassion when, sweating and shaking, I admitted my weakness. My mouth tasted like ashes.

"How long has it been, Auguste?" His gaze held mine captive.

"I am sorry, mon pere. I cannot recall. My mind plays tricks on me these days."

He smiled sadly, nodding his graying head. "As do all our minds, considering the circumstances of these troubled times, the hard compromises."

"I'm unsure how to begin," I said, crossing myself as best I could.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned…" He led me through the old formula. I had once again become one of the children he prepared for their first penitential encounter.

"I don't know the difference between what is and is not sin anymore, Abbé." The wax candles on his desk flickered, making the thick shadows in his tiny, musty study dance. I felt as if the very walls—surely lined with powerful spirits—listened.

"When questionable acts are brought to light, their true nature may be discerned, Auguste," he offered. "Then, if sorrow for sin is voiced, penance may be performed and sin absolved."

"Some acts ought not to be brought to light, lest they cause others to fall," I retorted. At this, I could have sworn I heard the rustling of wings from behind me. The hair stood up on the back of my exposed neck. "I have done the forbidden, paid the price for doing it, and yet my torment never ceases."

"How so, my son?" He touched his incense-scented stole.

"I can't stop writing." I blushed in mortal shame.

"Impossible!" he cried, before quieting his dismay and adding, "I remember how we dealt with your penance last time, according to both the letter and the spirit of the law. You received absolution and swore to change your life."

"It's in my head—the way the world was yesterday, the way it has become today, the way it will go in future… This time the price of my repentance is too high."

"My son, I offer you conditional absolution, and pray it is enough. But you know what is required for complete pardon."

My face upon the stubs of my handless arms, I sobbed into my sleeves. From the tower above came the Call to Prayer, and from behind me, the first slithering steps of the Angel Moloch. The light from the flaming sword meant to sever my sinful head and save my soul struck me.

Alas, I rejected heaven and fled into the night.

# Hunger

## By Derek Ott

Dek shifted uncomfortably. He fidgeted in his leather boots, trying to relieve the dull ache from standing in one place too long. Agitated, he made some quick deep sighs and crossed his arms over his chest, glancing across the confined room that he currently shared with numerous uncouth individuals. Dek scowled and tapped a foot anxiously while scoping to see how long his wait would be.

The old lady next to Dek rubbed up against his bare arm. Repeatedly. Her burlap smock was itching his left arm to irritation. Dek glowered at her and tried to rotate his body into a new position to avoid contact. The elderly woman ignored him and concentrated on the item concealed within her veined and bony hands. *Old hag*, thought Dek as he snorted.

While Dek positioned to avoid more aggravation from the roughness of the burlap material, he took a stiff jolt from the right. A towering man of dark complexion grinned with menace down upon him. Golden eyes examined Dek as teeth filed to points snapped at the air, jingling small hoop-rings lining one side of the brute's jaw. Hard muscles flexed in Dek's direction as the enormous figure challenged for extra space in the crowded room. *Meathead*, thought Dek. *Marla's Cutlets brings in all kinds*. The ebon man continued to grin with malice as he exposed a hand that was also concealing an object. A polished stone presented itself with a yellow number painted on it. *Great*, thought Dek, *he's going to eat the stores out before I get a chance to satisfy my hunger*.

Marla had steadily built a reputation within the city for having the best affordable noon-break special. Meats braised to perfection, stuffed in a golden, crusty turnover and filled with small bits of fennel, turnips, and tubers. It was a melting concoction that Dek discovered in the Cutlets' early days. Unfortunately, word spread quickly, and now the noon-break crowd outnumbered the shop's quaint seating area. Marla devised the numbered rock system to control the unruly crowds that continued to enlarge every moon, each person anxious to calm their ravenous appetites. "Take ye number and wait yur turn!" she would bellow at regular intervals. "Next!"

Someone odoriferous supplanted behind Dek, but he ignored glimpsing at the individual. Dek was sure it would be another scandalous individual unworthy of obtaining a noon-break meal before him. *I'm a busy person*, thought Dek in anger, *don't they realize I have things to accomplish this afternoon!*

"Next! Thirteen!" Already knowing his number but taken with restlessness, Dek glanced back at his stone clenched within his palm. A bright, yellow forty-six mocked him. Dek sighed and rubbed his face with disgust. Meathead laughed and made sure that his number fourteen was readily visible within Dek's line of sight.

"Thirteen! Claim yur spot or squander yur meal away!"

# The Corner Chandler

## By Chet Gottfried

A stranger slid into the Corner Chandler. He leaned against the closed door while his eyes became accustomed to the yellow light thrown by oil lanterns. On either side of his waist he had two short swords. His face was young and his voice, a harsh whisper.

"I'm looking for Ox-Thorstein."

We ignored him. Cutthroats were welcome but familiar customers.

Grise Tree-foot owned the shop. He was a pirate who gave up the sea after losing too many body parts. His left leg was wood from the knee down, and his right arm ended in a hook. A large hook. An insane hook. Grise could slice a man a dozen ways and, on suitable occasions, had. His hook was also convenient for cutting bolts of cloth.

The shop floor was a maze of barrels and shelves. At the back, a rickety ladder led to an upper walkway. One side had cord, varying from laces for a jerkin to hawser for a ship. The other had blankets of every size and color.

Ariana bought blankets. Lots of blankets. She claimed that she "felt" the cold. She never had enough blankets. Summer would roll by, and she'd be piling on extra covers.

The stranger said, again, "I'm looking for Ox-Thorstein."

The upper walkway creaked while Ariana unfolded another blanket. The blanket was kneaded, held to the light, and pressed against her face. If satisfied, she'd drape it ceremoniously over the rail.

**My son Dylan was sixteen years old. He couldn't take his eyes off the weapons that Grise had accumulated. Withdrawing a long, curved dagger from a very ornate sheath, Dylan said, "Look at the blood groove on this!"**

I was looking at Grise's potions. They included everything from curing toothache to improving weapons. Wizards frequented the shop because sailors bartered raw material from distant lands. Basilisk stings and chimera hair were standard fare.

I asked, "Does this sleeping potion work?"

"Sure," Grise growled. "I use it myself. Mix a bit in a bucket or two of ale, and you'll sleep like a babe."

Ariana made a face. She didn't approve of alcohol.

My son Dylan was sixteen years old. He couldn't take his eyes off the weapons that Grise had accumulated. Withdrawing a long, curved dagger from a very ornate sheath, Dylan said, "Look at the blood groove on this!"

Overhead, Ariana smiled. She liked knives too.

"Only five silver pieces," Grise said.

Staring at me, the stranger said, "I'm looking for Ox-Thorstein. The earl set a price on him."

"Which earl would that be?" I asked politely.

"Probably Earl Joceln," Dylan said. "He's always posting rewards."

continued on page 24

# Interview
## Cecilia Dart-Thornton

**Q: Your first trilogy is called *The Bitterbynde*. Your next series is the *Crowthistle Chronicles*. Explain for our readers the significant of these terms and why you chose them.**
A: The term "Bitterbynde" originated in a poem I wrote. At the time I wrote it, I was fascinated with Old English (I still am), and it intrigued me how many words of Old English have survived, completely intact, right through Middle English to the Modern English of today. It also struck me that those OE survivors are very special words, in that they seem to have a raw power that's not always evident in later arrivals. Tolkien used a lot of OE survivors in his work, and I think it's one of the reasons why his readers experience such a resonance. One such word is "bitter," and another is "bind." The poem, a whimsical piece, was written to deliberately include as many OESs as possible; in some cases I combined them to produce compounds such as 'end-door' 'snowship' and 'everwild.' Bitterbynde (spelled with a 'y' to make it more Chaucerian) was one of those compounds, and it seemed to me that the new word would refer to a binding vow which, if broken, would have bitter consequences—a geas such as the one laid on Ashalind when she went through the Gate of Oblivion's Kiss. Thus the name of the series.

As for *Crowthistle*, again it's one of those compound words that attract me, but in this case, I created it out of a picture in my mind. I love corvine birds such as ravens and crows because they are beautiful, and legendary, and gothic. And thistles in general have a kind of wild Scottish highland appeal—besides which they are hardy weeds armed with weapons, the street-fighters of the vegetable world—and again, they can be beautiful in a kind of ancient mossy Celtic churchyard way. At least, that's the way I see it. I think Scotch thistles are picturesque, but then I don't have to try to get rid of them out of a cow-paddock. I chose a word that expressed hardiness and prickliness and a lot of other connotations for a very specific reason, which will not become fully apparent until the final book in the series (FALLOWBLADE) is published. For now it's a secret!

**Q: Your second book of *The Bitterbynde* trilogy (LADY OF THE SORROWS) was published when you first appeared in Deep Magic with a writing craft article. Now your second book of the second series (THE WELL OF TEARS) is published. How is your life (as a writer) different now than it was back then?**
A: Between *The Bitterbynde* and *Crowthistle* there were major upheavals in my personal life, and I feel that my craft probably suffered for it. In my writerly life, what happened was that I started getting feedback. The whole time I was writing *The Bitterbynde* I had no input on my work whatsoever from the outside world, so I felt free to write exactly as I wished. I had finished all three books before I showed the first word of the first book to anyone at all. After they were published, people started giving me their opinions, which were always good, with no exceptions; but it was then that it came home to me that Others were actually Walking Through My World. While it was terribly rewarding and a truly wonderful feeling, knowing that those Others loved my world as much as I did, it also had the effect of making me very self-conscious about every word I wrote. Involuntarily, I found myself wondering, 'What will readers think if I write this,

or that?' And so my writing was no longer coming straight from the heart—it was being filtered through my concern for the viewpoint of the outside world. Though aware of this problem, I did not know how to fix it. And it is a problem, because writing from the heart is all I want to do. I *think*, through sheer perseverance, I have beaten it, but I have to force myself to be aware of the trap all the time.

**Q: In both your series, you rely on similar magical creatures and settings. Your worlds are full of seelie and unseelie wights that can benefit or plague humankind depending on what kind they are. What made you decide to stick to these magical creatures in your new series?**
A: Certainly not lack of ideas for other interesting supernatural wildlife! It was because I felt I had not yet finished with them—that they and I still had plenty more dancing to do. I do love my seelie and unseelie wights! Still, I can hardly wait to tear open the wrapping paper and take out the new ones I have in mind, but that won't be for a long while yet, as I am such a slow writer.

**Q: What inspired the story-arc of the *Crowthistle Chronicles*?**
A: It was the result of a motley bag of ideas that wove themselves together. I ended up with one huge arc that is rooted in the first book and soars like a rainbow through the second (THE WELL OF TEARS) and third (WEATHERWITCH) to culminate in the last, as well as lots of smaller arcs along the way that take off, perform their curve through the narrative sky and alight with more or less precision. The large arc is a secret at the moment, but the smaller ones are based on such phenomena as some people's unconscious repetition of the lives of their parents and grandparents. Another sub-plot explores the notion of immortality.

**Q: The series is a tale that spans generations. Book One is about Jarred and Lilith. Book Two is about their daughter Jewel. Book 3, we assume, is about Jewel's daughter Astariel. How does the concept of Family connections play a role in your work?**
A: When one is writing about a world in which immortal beings exist, it becomes logical to write about human families, or dynasties, as well as about individuals. Human lives are short compared to the interminable spans enjoyed by the creatures of myth and folklore. In addition, each of my protagonists in each generation had a part to play that could not possibly continue past a certain point, so I took up the story with their progeny. Astariel (or Asrathiel as she becomes known) is different—she could go on.

**Q: What are some of the challenges of carrying a storyline over multiple books when the cast changes in every book?**
A: Remembering who is whose grandparent is sometimes trickier than you'd imagine—thank heavens for copyeditors! Having a time line is vital, or you tend to forget how much some of your earlier characters would have aged. But I liked having fresh canvases to work with each time!

**Q: THE WELL OF TEARS hardcover came with an interactive CD-ROM. What is your vision for using other media with your work?**
A: I am crazy abut digital media and only wish I had time to study 3D animation, because I'd love to provide mind-blowingly gorgeous 3D walk-through moving pictures for all my books, complete with original soundtracks. Just a pipe dream, but an inspiring one!

**Q: What has been your readership's reaction to this new series, compared with the first? Is the reaction different depending on the locality of your readers? (Australian compared with American compared with European, etc.)**
A: The response to *The Bitterbynde* was overwhelming. The reaction to *Crowthistle* thus far has been less so, but the book I am working on now, *Fallowblade*, feels to me like the *Bitterbynde* books felt when I was working on them, so I'll be interested to see what the reaction will be when all four *Crowthistle* books are out. I'm not sure about the reaction being different in different parts of the world.… I do know that they absolutely adore The *Bitterbynde* in Australia and the Netherlands!

**Q: Any movie or film plans for your work?**
A: I have recently signed with a new film agent, Intellectual Property Group. It's early days yet, but they have a fantastic track record for getting movies off the ground, so I'm feeling hopeful!

**Q: You switched publishers with this new series. What happened?**
A: I still have the same publishers in the UK, Australia and elsewhere. In the USA, it was a matter of better advance royalties. The great thing is, now I have TWO publishers in the USA, which I love.

**Q: What have you learned as a writer that you wish you knew back before THE ILL-MADE MUTE was published?**
A: Choose very, very carefully when you sign a contract. Know a lot about who you are signing with. Read everything, and make sure you are aware of all the ramifications.

**Q: What is the most rewarding thing about being an author?**
A: Feedback from obsessed readers ;)

**Q: What are your plans after the final book of *Crowthistle Chronicles* is published?**
A: I want to take a break from fantasy and finally, after many years of putting it off for all sorts of reasons, write a book about my grandfather's life. It would be fiction, but based entirely on fact. My family stores old letters, and we have hundreds written to and from my grandfather. He had an amazing life, really amazing, and it would make such a brilliant story I can't wait to get started. It's just something I feel I have to do. However, fantasy is my first love and I have just SO many ideas for new fantasies waiting to be realized, so I will return to it.… I wish there were more hours in the writing day!

# Mirror Life

## By Silvia Moreno-Garcia

### 1

For any lover of beautiful things she would have been the ultimate prize. The woman was what the stories had promised and more; yet her beauty was distant, like that of a chiselled sculpture.

As he looked at her from the balcony, she seemed suddenly aware of his presence and glanced around, finally staring back at him.

Nikolaos moved away, startled by her gaze. He placed his attention back on her sour uncle.

"As you can see, she is young and lovely," muttered the man. "Sit down."

Nikolaos and Stefan complied.

"She would be a good wife," the uncle said, handing them a glass of wine.

"That is precisely why I am here," Nikolaos said.

"Yet you do not give a solid marriage proposal. I can't let my niece wander off with a stranger."

"I vouch for Nikolaos," Stefan replied. "He is an honorable man."

"Your cousin may be honorable, but what about this marquis? Will he be honorable too? How do I know I will not be rewarded with a ruined niece knocking at my door?"

**"That is precisely why I am here," Nikolaos said.**

**"Yet you do not give a solid marriage proposal. I can't let my niece wander off with a stranger."**

Nikolaos shook his head. "Darius would not do that. He seeks a suitable wife."

"Yes, yes. But why can't we arrange it properly? Not just this parading of my niece in front of him."

"If he likes Miranda, wedding plans will be made. He will not marry before meeting the girl."

The older man grumbled and downed his drink.

"Darius would provide well for her. He is handsome and courageous. The crown prince much admired his bravery in combat," Nikolaos continued.

"But she does not have time to prepare. No suitable clothes, nothing. My Miranda can not go looking like a pauper."

Nikolaos smiled, understanding the bend the conversation was taking. "I would provide anything she may need. If she wishes to purchase some dresses before parting, I can arrange for a generous amount to be at her disposal."

"That could be, that could be," nodded the uncle. "You must understand my hesitation. She is my late sister's only daughter."

"Of course," Nikolaos agreed.

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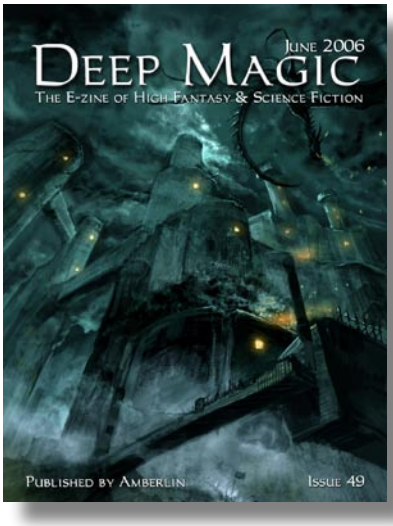
# Featured Artist
## Kuang Hong




**Age:** 25
**Residence:** Beijing
**Hobbies:** PC gaming, watching movies, traveling, music.
**Personal Quote:** To a persistent person, painting a rainbow is only a matter of time.
**Favorite Book or Author:** J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.
**Started Painting In:** Primary school
**Artist Most Inspired By:** Yoshitaka Amano
**Media You Work In:** Pencil and digital.
**Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed:** Some Chinese fantasy novel covers, magazine covers, game posters, websites.
**Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally:** www.zemotion.net
**Website URL:** www.zemotion.net for the moment. I'll be finishing my own domain's new webpage soon; there will be a redirect.

**Q: How did you come to be an artist?**
A: Started scribbling around the walls at home since I was 2-years-old. From Primary school to University, I learned academic things, but after I graduated, I fell for fantasy and digital paintings, and with practice and experimentation, I slowly came to develop my own style, and continue to do so now.

**Q: How would you describe your work?**
A: It has been mistaken for wrong time period and spatial feeling. Colors represent the feelings of an artist when he did that piece of work—it's a channel for me to input my feelings and thoughts with my special designs and concepts.

**Q: Where do you find your inspiration?**
A: Inspirations come from life. Like when you dream, you're actually in reality; my thoughts are wide, so hidden deep in my heart I take those little threads of reality and put together my ideas and hints of others' fantasies—it's very easy to find my inspiration.

continued on next page

**Q: What inspired this piece (our cover art)? (Tell us its story...)**
A: It was actually just an experimental piece for me to test different brushes and color settings. Also trying out on perspective, it's something like a first piece of environmental work for me as well. It was inspired by a piece of work by Yanick Dusseault.

**Q; What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?**
A: Hmm…I don't think there are any yet, but I'm working hard on it. I hope to finish a set of works that can totally present myself in style in concepts and colors.

**Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/ Fantasy genre?**
A: Because this genre of creations is very free with no restrictions, I think there are many styles and ways to present it...

# Openings
## By Mark Reeder

As usual, I opened my mouth and inserted my size ten feet. Not that they taste so bad, with a lot of soy sauce and salsa, but I was looking for comfort food. You see, a little while ago I was reading submissions to *Deep Magic* and made the following comment: *It seems that all too often this genre of story starts off with a spectacular image, such as a character looking down on the dead body of another character. The sameness of beginnings is wearing a bit thin. Perhaps we need an editorial on how to start a short story or novel.*

Beware what you suggest.

So here I am giving my insights into that all important, first sentence.

'You only get one chance to make a first impression,' so the saying goes. But as writers, we should also add, 'We only get one chance to make a good impression.' If the first line and the first paragraph don't grab the editor's attention, he or she will spike the submission and go to the next one. Even if the editor takes the time to read the whole story, that first bad line, that first bad paragraph are hanging like a guillotine over the whole shebang. KATHUNK! Next, thank you.

Even if we writers just post our work on a blog, only our most loyal friends will wade through a story that begins along the lines of:

*It was back in the days of the Tevishah Emperor, Ramocan Java IV, that the Imperialist Hegemony's Diplomatic Corps first spotted Jagr Hundsfrownen as a recalcitrant upstart worthy of attention, and perhaps even, an invitation to join the elite Bandishear Squadron of Duke Parmesean.*

Or: *Leda, the neophyte guardswoman, looked down at the crumpled body of Captain Brandeis and paled. Her long, dark hair was matted against her narrow, elfin face. Tears glistened in her emerald, green eyes and she wailed, "Oh my god! What have I done?"*

Or, one of my favorites, a winner from the annual Bulwer Lytton contest: "*Flick that Bic. Crisp that chick. And you'll feel my cold steel, through your last meal.*"

Scifi luminary Ben Bova says writing is hard work. (It's right there on his web site.) So why go to all that hard work of rising early in the morning . . . laboring at the computer late at night . . . missing little Annie's ball game, to have the first few sentences push the editor and potential readers away.

All the great writers say the same thing: Don't spend your time trying to write the perfect opening, just get the story down, and the rest will follow. Then, go back and rewrite the story. This is great advice. But after you rewrite and rewrite, don't neglect the opening. Make it sizzle; make it snap; make it different; make it . . . well, make it jump up and grab the editor's throat. Generally, this means something that rivets the editor's attention, something akin to the first time you kissed your sweetie or Santa delievered your first bike. You remember that grinning feeling suffusing face and body for days. By the same token, you want the editor or first reader to be thinking about your incredibly well written opening for days.

I once attended a writers group that had brought in an author to talk about writing. The

group met at Barnes and Noble. The author showed up with a stack of books he had picked randomly from the shelves. After he read the opening paragraphs to us, he said something remarkably simple and profound: Your story starts at the beginning. It tells readers that something interesting is going to happen to these remarkable characters, and if they want to know what it is, they have to read on.

So, how do wannabe published writers of Scifi and Fantasy learn how to write that all important, first line and first paragraph, which will entice editors and readers to read their stories? Simple—read the masters and see how they do it. Here are some examples. See if you can tell which author wrote which openings. All of these are taken from Hugo and Nebula award winning authors. The answers will appear in next month's issue of *Deep Magic* or on our message board forums.

Oh, one more thing. Even a great author hashes an opening occasionally. But by the time he or she has written a novel that doesn't quite open spectacularly, their loyal readers are willing to read on anyway. As new writers, we don't have an established fan base, so we have to be great from the opening.

1) "Lay ordinate and abscissa on the century. Now cut me a quadrant. Third quadrant if you please. I was born in 'fifty. Here it is 'seventy-five."

2) "I've watched through his eyes, listened through his ears, and I tell you he's the one. Or at least as close as we're going to get."

3) Lessa woke cold. Cold with more than the chill of the everlastingly clammy stone walls.

4) It was starting to end after what seemed most of eternity to me.

5) His wife had held him in her arms as if she could keep death away from him. He had cried out, "My God, I am a dead man!"

6) He was a hundred and seventy days dying and not yet dead.

7) She gave up her heart quite willingly.

8) In his seventeenth year of life, Jai gained an empire and lost everything he valued.

9) Maris rode the storm ten feet above the sea, taming the winds on wide cloth of metal wings.

10) Roum is a city built on seven hills. They say it was the capital of man in one of the earlier cycles. I did not know that, for my guild was Watching, not Remembering.

# Wrath of Aster

## By Jeff Wheeler

## Prologue

Pengarden Church
Tier of Premye

Ochre pink clouds touched the dazzling orange sky as the sun set over the Tier of Premye. The High Seer of the Nasturtium plodded towards the church precincts, his entire body aching, his eyelids nearly clenched shut in exhaustion. He had lost two Nasturtium to fatigue already. Branhe set a punishing pace, and only a half-comatose priest ten years younger had managed to keep up with him. The other six trailed behind, trying not to tangle themselves in their black robes.

As he approached Pengarden Church, he spied an Espion in the shadows by a vaulted window, watching him approach. The entire church was surrounded, at least twenty of Prince Jevin's spies in position around it at all times. It was a prison now, not a place of worship—the prison of Jorganon, Mark of Alvaron.

"Why can I not discern their thoughts?" muttered the priest at his elbow.

Branhe's answer was equally low. "You cannot pierce the thoughts of the Espion when they wear the ring. The runes on the band are from our Way."

"I don't understand, High Seer. The Espion can't use Deep Isme. Can they?"

"You are young, Cormyr. There was a time before when we controlled the Espion. They do not know what they have any more. There are only a few left who would remember the older days. See how he glares at us. Pointed steel would work well enough. I'm half tempted to run him through."

"High Seer!" the priest said, his voice sounding shocked.

"They affront our god. This watch against our house is appalling. They wait each day, preparing to burst the doors and seize their man. They shall not have him. They shall not."

Branhe reached the door of the church and inserted a cold iron key into the lock. He twisted it, releasing the mechanism within and pulled on the ring fastened to the wood. "Linger until the others arrive and allow them in. Feed yourselves and rest, for you will travel again before dawn. I go to the Deconeus."

"I obey, High Seer Branhe." The priest nodded and locked the door in his wake, guarding it from the prowling spies circling the church like wolves.

As Branhe advanced into the private areas of the church, he heard Jorganon's voice through the door of the study. The insufferable wretch was always twitching with demands.

"What is the matter? Where are we going?"

"Patience, Jorganon. You are leaving tonight."

He coughed with laughter. "Tonight? Do you think the shadows will cover us from Jevin's Espion? They are watching the night, they are anticipating my escape. How can you protect me? How can you...?"

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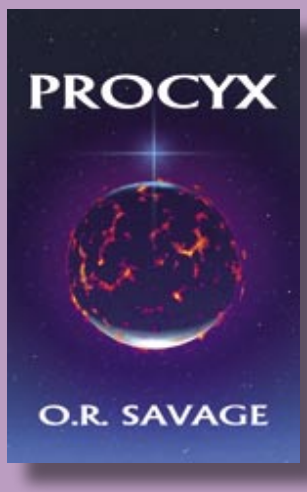


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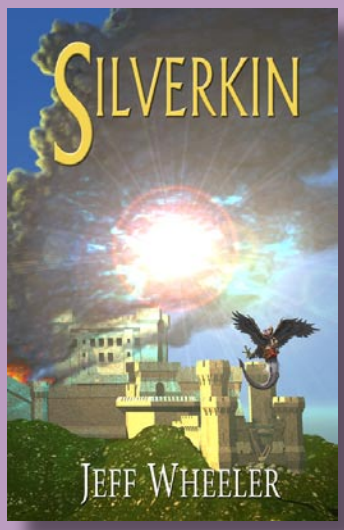


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Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Fantasy

## Seeker: Book One of the Noble Warriors

**By William Nicholson**

Seeker After Truth (or just 'Seeker' for short) has grown up on on the holy island of Anacrea, where he is the son of one of the resident scholar/teachers. Seeker takes after his father, but longs to be like his older brother, Blazing Justice, who is one of the Noble Warriors, the Nomana, who devote themselves to unarmed combat against the forces of evil in the name of the All and Only, the god who dwells within Anacrea. Seeker is now sixteen, the age at which he should be able to join the Noble Warriors, but his father will not allow him to do so, wanting Seeker instead to follow in his footsteps.

In a faraway land, Morning Star has also just turned sixteen, and she decides to head out on a journey to find her mother who long ago disappeared. Morning Star believes she headed for Anacrea to join the Nomana. Morning Star also wants to join the Nomana, in no small part so that she may be reunited with her mother.

In the lands outside of Anacrea, the Wildman terrorizes pilgrims on their way to Anacrea. He is a young thug whose charismatic personality has brought him fame and notoriety. One day he encounters some Nomana who, without weapons or armor, effortlessly defeat him. His life being characterized by turmoil and struggle, Wildman finds the Nomana not only powerful, but also peaceful. He longs to have both the power and the peace, and so he sets off to Anacrea to become a Nomana.

As is to be expected, these three meet together as they attend the ceremony where the Nomana choose their next acolytes. Unexpectedly, none of the three gets chosen to join the Nomana. As they all leave dejectedly, they meet up and decide that the only way to become Noble Warriors is to prove themselves to the Nomana, to show the Nomana that they made a mistake in rejecting them.

In the neighboring empire of Radiance, the minions of the cruel priest-king Radiant Vision have created the ultimate weapon that turns the very blood of a person into a bomb that explodes upon exposure to air. Rumors of this weapon have leaked out from Radiance, and Seeker and his friends determine that the only way they will be allowed into the Nomana is to discover and destroy this weapon, the nature of which they are not aware.

Thus begins a race against time, to find an unknown weapon in a foreign land and diffuse it before it can be used against the holy island of Anacrea. Along the way, of course, the three friends must learn to trust one another and confront their own shortcomings.

*Seeker* is the first of a projected trilogy, but is self-contained and stands almost entirely on its own. William Nicholson, whose prior credits include the Fire Song trilogy and the screenplays for *Gladiator* and *Shadowlands*, has written a strong and captivating first installment of what promises to be a fascinating new series. Nicholson's weakness is that his world is not fully fleshed out, but the internal struggles of the characters, as well as the captivating plot, definitely make up for that – and he does have a couple more volumes to continue to build his world, to put the flesh on the bones that he has established in this first volume.

*Possible objectionable material: none.*

*(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)*

continued on next page

Comic Review: Fantasy

## The Hedge Knight

**By George R.R. Martin, adapted by Ben Avery, Mike Miller, and Mike Crowell**

## The Wood Boy/The Burning Man

**By Raymond E. Feist and Tad Williams, adapted by Sean Jordan, Matt Broome, Brett Booth, and Bobby Souza**

One of the most obvious things about well-written fantasy is the preponderance of striking mental images. Ask any fantasy fan what's their favorite scene from a novel, and you'll get a vivid description. Better yet, ask any fantasy fan what he or she thought of *The Lord of the Rings* movies, and chances are almost sure you'll get a discussion of how the movies looked, rather than how they treated the story and characters. The image isn't everything, but it is definitely important.

So why is it that there's never been good comics adaptations of favorite fantasy and SF novels? There've been a few in the past, but the fact that I doubt many of our readers could come up with more than a half dozen speaks volumes to the fact that they were mediocre at best. But that's changing now, thanks to the efforts of Dabel Brother Productions, a new comic company whose current list is mostly adaptations of fantasy and SF stories.

DBP started out with an adaptation of George R.R. Martin's "The Hedge Knight" from Robert Silverberg's first *Legends* collection. The story is a prequel of sorts to his insanely popular "Song of Ice and Fire" series. While knowledge of the world of Westeros as revealed in the series is not needed to enjoy "The Hedge Knight", having such knowledge makes the world all the more rich and inviting. The story itself is a good one, ripe with opportunities that a good comic could capture. And DBP's adaptation of the story does incredible justice to the world of Westeros. Ben Avery has taken the story and broken it down into a comic narrative in a way that does full justice to the story being told without faltering much in the transition.

One of the dangers of converting stories and novels to comics is that comics are not all that text-narrative dependent. That is, in a written story, the image is not what is driving the writer's plot, whereas in the comic, you can't have pages of narrative, giving background to what's going on. It's the pictures that move the story forward, with the balloons and boxes helping explain what the art is showing. So it's inevitable that an adaptation of a story or novel to comic either falters by not explaining the backstory enough, or falters by having too many narrative boxes that explain everything necessary for the story but unable to be shown in the art panels.

Ben Avery's script for "The Hedge Knight" nearly escapes this dilemma, with nearly the right balance. Yes, there are more narrative caption boxes than one would find in the average adventure/superhero comic, but not so many that it feels like what you're reading is really the story with a lot of four-color pictures breaking up the text.

The art, by penciller Mike S. Miller and inker Mike Crowell, is superb in capturing the tension and action that propels the story forward, while at the same time keeping the reader's interest from flagging during the non-action sequences. The lines are sharp and defined and the sense of layout is balanced. This is some of the most top-quality traditional comic art I've seen recently.

DBP's next outing in telling stories from *Legends* was not as successful, I'm afraid to report; although, were it not for the success of "The Hedge Knight" overshadowing it, "The Wood Boy" and "The Burning Man" would be rated higher by me than they are.

The problem mentioned above, about having too much narration to move the story forward, is the problem that brings "The Wood Boy" down and also "The Burning Man" to a lesser degree. "The Wood Boy" tells a story from Raymond E. Feist's novel *Magician*. However, the story is one that contains little action and even less dialogue, so what we experience are a series of pictures from the story with text in between. The story and art, though, are

enjoyable, but the sum of the parts does not exceed the whole in this instance and one is left unsatisfied by the overall product.

Tad Williams' "The Burning Man" suffers from the same malady of too much story, but at least there's a lot of action interspersed to help keep the adaptation from becoming one big "illustrated story." However, there are still some pages where there are more word balloons than actual art, which totally derails the forward action established by the wonderful art.

Still, these are good adaptations and enjoyable in spite of their flaws. DBP is currently putting out more and more adaptations, including stories by Orson Scott Card, Raymond E. Feist, and Jane Lindskold, as well as original-to-comics stories. I'm excited by what they're putting out: it seems a good and refreshing jolt to comics that have become stale and boring over the past few years.

*Possible objectionable material: There are some images of sensuality in "The Burning Man".*

*(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)*

continued from page 10

Ariana said, "I bet it's Earl Erik. He sailed by a fortnight ago."

The stranger said to me, "You're Ox-Thorstein."

Dylan said, "If you know he's Ox-Thorstein, why didn't you wait until Dad left the shop? You could have stabbed him in the back or hit him over the head when he was leaving. No one would have suspected anything. You'd have the element of surprise."

"Shut up, son. I have to apologize for my kid's manners. He overlooked the fact that you're hunting the wrong man. I mean I'm the wrong man. But don't worry. I'll see that he's punished once we return to our farm."

"Why punish him?" the stranger asked. "It wasn't a bad idea."

"Thank you. He's a clever lad. He just doesn't know when to keep his trap shut."

"But you are Ox-Thorstein."

I laughed heartily. "Certainly not!"

Dylan asked, "Why does the earl want a turnip farmer? He couldn't be that hard up, could he? It isn't like it's spring, and everyone is short of food."

"Earl Josep is offering 500 pieces of silver for Ox-Thorstein's head, and I mean to have it."

"Where is Earl Josep?" Ariana asked.

I said, "The earl is about a ten-day ride to the northwest, but you have to go through desert country. And as much as I admire initiative, you'd be foolish to bring a head. The flesh would decompose. My head or even Ox-Thorstein's head would be unrecognizable. You'd be out the 500 pieces."

"A head wouldn't decompose if I ride quickly. I have a good horse."

Dylan asked, "What if he carried the head in a bucket of wine? Wouldn't that keep the head okay?"

"Red or white wine?" Grise asked. When we looked questioningly at him, Grise explained. "White wine costs more. We had a poor harvest for white grapes. Plenty of red though—as long as it works."

"You men are so foolish," Ariana said. "Why bother with wine? Vinegar would be much better for preserving a head."

Grise shrugged. "Well, I have to admit, vinegar is a lot cheaper. Four coppers a barrel. That should be enough for preserving three or four heads, let alone one. Even for one as big as yours."

I said, "I don't have a big head. More important, you're overlooking a simple fact. I'm not Ox-Thorstein. I'm a farmer. We have a small holding and grow barley and turnips. We also have sheep and a few cows. No earl would be interested in my head—or any other part of my body."

"Ox-Thorstein is a cheap, cowardly pirate."

"You have to admit, Dad," Dylan said. "He got the cheap part right."

"Ox-Thorstein raided Earl Josep's land, burnt three farmsteads, and murdered a dozen people."

Dylan said, "You can take him, Dad. I know you can."

"Thanks, son, but I'm sure we can settle this without bloodshed. The stranger here—what's your name?"

"Owien."

The name sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it right away.

"Right. I'm sure Owien doesn't want to make a mistake and behead the wrong person."

Owien nodded. "Three months ago, I brought King Starkard the head of the cousin who treacherously tried to overthrow Pernia. But apparently I beheaded the wrong cousin, and

Starkard was very pissed. He put a price on my head. Me! Would you believe it?"

I shook my head side to side. "Kings these days have no sense of gratitude."

"I had to leave Pernia very quickly," Owien said. "I lost money on that deal."

"Business is hard on everyone," I said.

"So this time around, I got a pretty good description. I wouldn't want to screw up twice."

"Thor forbid."

"Ox-Thorstein is a man past forty and tall. Iron-gray speckles cover his brown hair, and his red beard is down to his waist. His chest is enormous, but his belly is larger, which is how he came by the name of Ox."

Everyone stared at me.

"Well," I said, "the description is a loose fit. Plenty of tall men live around here. And you want to talk about beer bellies? Walk into the Duck and Drake, and you'll see beer belly heaven."

Ariana asked sharply, "And when have you started going to taverns?"

"Passing by," I said, "only passing by. I could imagine what it looked like inside. All those frightening beer bellies. Mind you, I hear that Sorli serves a tasty ale at the Duck and Drake. Not that I ever tried it myself. The ale brings them in from everywhere. They ride for days and days. All those tall men and all those beer bellies. Maybe you should check it out?"

"Ox-Thorstein wears a camel-hair cloak."

"Who doesn't wear a camel-hair cloak? The northwest leads to desert country. There are caravans coming and going all the time. Hundreds of camels. And even more camel-hair cloaks. Look, my son is wearing one. So is my wife up there. Grise has a camel-hair shirt. Please don't draw any conclusions by camel hair. Clothing is a very fickle means of identification."

"Ox-Thorstein has a favorite weapon, a mace. He used to prefer a sword, but once it got stuck in a fellow's rib cage. Since then he only carries a mace. He calls it Skullcracker."

"Okay, I have a mace. Big deal. You know how it is. Some kid tries to steal a sheep, so you have to have something to wave about to threaten the kid. Otherwise you don't have any sheep. Sure I'd prefer to wave a sword, but I'd probably cut myself."

Ariana nodded.

"Skullcracker has an ebony shaft. Tied to it is a stone that fell from the stars."

"That's nothing like my mace. First, where could you find a piece of ebony long enough for a shaft? Second, ebony has a notoriously brittle grain. It would crack the moment you struck it against anything having the slightest resistance. Look at this mace. The shaft is ash, not ebony. Ash gives a lot more. See. It's a blond wood. Very light and supple. Ebony is black. As for stones falling from the sky, I don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about. I found this stone in my fields. It had natural grooves, which made it easy to tie onto the shaft."

Dylan said, "You told me it was a magic rock."

"Kids," I laughed apologetically. "They believe any story you tell them."

Owien asked, "Why does the stone on your mace glitter so?"

"If it isn't magic," Dylan said, "then it's a lump of marble with crystal veins that catch the light."

Ariana looked over the rail. "No, dear. Marble is much smoother. Your father broke the rock off an outcrop of mica-schist. The mica reflects the light, which is why it twinkles. It's a very pretty mace."

"Go on, Dad," Dylan said. "Why don't you take him already?"

"Kids!" I said. "He's probably hungry."

"Buy me this dagger, and I'll take him."

"It's only six silver pieces," Grise growled. "And it has a terrific sheath."

I said, "A couple of minutes ago you said it was five silver pieces."

Grise said, "It seems more important now."

At that moment a second stranger slipped into the shop. A woman. She had Owien's fluidity, easing the door open and shut without any apparent motion. They stood side by side, dressed and armed—two swords each—in a similar fashion. Then I recognized them. "I've heard of you. You're the Feig brothers. You're notorious. Half the counties have prices on your heads."

"Flattery is always welcome," the woman said, "but I'm no brother. We're twins. The Feig twins: Ewien and Owien. I'm Ewien. Okay, Owien, why does Ox-Thorstein still have his head on his shoulders? It was a simple enough job. Do I have to do everything myself?"

"He says that he isn't Ox-Thorstein. I've been arguing with him all afternoon."

"Are you kidding?" Ewien asked. "He's got a big chest, a bigger belly, a beard down to his waist, a mace strapped to his side, and a broken nose."

I said, "We haven't discussed the broken nose yet. I walked into the outhouse door one night."

Dylan nodded. "Dad doesn't have a damn worth of night vision."

Ewien ignored us. "What are you waiting for? A blood-oath?"

"What if we're wrong? Remember what happened with King Starkard?"

"Exactly—" I began to say.

"If we're wrong, we're wrong. You make mistakes. I make mistakes. King Starkard makes mistakes. It happens. No one is perfect. We just do the best we can with what we have. Okay? Now let's cut off his head and be done with it."

Owien asked Grise, "About that vinegar?"

Grise nodded. "Four coppers a barrel."

"Excuse me," I said. "Are you really going to kill me in front of my family? Don't you have any manners?"

"They can leave first," Ewien said.

Ariana pouted. "I haven't finished my blanket selection yet. If I'm going to lose my husband, I'll need extra blankets to keep warm."

"That's a comfort," I said.

"It's not too late to buy me that knife, Dad. I'll watch your back."

"Only five silver pieces," Grise said.

I asked him, "The price is going down?"

"Final sale."

"That settles it," Ewien said. She and her brother drew their swords simultaneously. The four steel blades were flashed around in an impressive manner.

"Wow," Dylan said. "Forget the knife."

Owien said, "We don't like to show off, but we thought you'd like to know what you're up against. You can lean over against that barrel and make it easier for yourself. One clean cut should see your head off."

"For once and all," I said, "I'm not Ox-Thorstein."

"Oh, yes you are," Grise Tree-foot growled. "I have it on the best of authority. But there are rules. Anything you break, you pay for. Splatter blood on anything, and you pay for that too."

"I'd never quibble with you, Grise, but are these the types of people you want to do business with?"

Grise said, "I'm promised a 10 percent finder's fee."

"You're charging fifty silver pieces? That's outrageous."

Ewien said, "You can't make money without spending money."

The Feig twins advanced to the center of the room, swords at the ready.

"You won't feel a thing," Ewien promised. "Our blades are sharp, our skill incredible. You're not facing two people—you're facing four. Your son will be able to tell your grandchildren that you were killed by the Feig twins. It's an honor that no one will forget."

"I'm pleased about the part concerning grandchildren," I said. "Everybody should have some."

Neither of the twins answered me. They happened to be very busy dodging. Ariana missed with the first blanket she dropped on them. But the second and third blankets put the twins off balance. Grise was merrily mumbling numbers to himself. I hope he didn't expect that we'd pay for all the blankets. Anyway, the fourth, fifth, and sixth blankets tangled the Feig twins very nicely. A couple of soft taps from my mace, and the Feigs went to sleep without the aid of any potion.

"I'm glad that's over," I said. "I thought we'd have to wait forever until the second twin showed up." I turned to Dylan. "Bind them. Then have Renald bring a few men to carry them aboard our ship."

"What about the knife, Dad?"

I asked Grise, "Five silvers?"

"Done. Now that's ninety coppers for the blankets and a hundred silver pieces for your new crew members."

"You old pirate! How can you charge ninety coppers for those blankets? You can sell them to someone else."

"Their swords put holes in 'em. You can't expect me to sell those. Think of my reputation."

"And you said fifty for the twins."

"That's fifty each," Grise explained. "It isn't easy getting a matched pair to come to my shop on short notice. You and your daft stories. Why don't you get them drunk like everyone else if you need sailors?"

Ariana came down the ladder.

"You know why," I concluded sadly, "Some of us don't approve of alcohol."

Ariana smiled. "Who lost his magic mace when he got drunk?"

"Pay the man, dear," I said.

"That's 'Pay the man, Captain,' " she said sharply, "or I'll cut off your miserable head myself."

"What does everyone have against my head?"

"It's too large," Dylan said.

# The End

*Chet is an artist-writer who has drifted about for various decades, with various publications (fiction, reviews, nonfiction, artwork), while enjoying playing on the web and developing his own site with artwork, games, and photos.*

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Miranda watched with rising panic as the maid packed her trunk. Suddenly, it was clear this was really happening. Not that she hadn't known another match would be arranged. Her uncle was keen to remind her she was an unwanted expense.

But the quick succession of events had left her breathless. Less than a week had passed since she'd seen the man from Asenat for the first time.

"You must impress him," her aunt said, flicking away a stray lock of hair from Miranda's face. "All gentle courtesies and soft words, remember that."

"Couldn't you come?" Miranda asked.

"Sir Nikolaos will watch over you. You'll also have Ella."

Miranda, who didn't feel very comforted by the idea of a perfect stranger and her maid as the only sources of assistance in a strange land, shook her head.

"Don't make me go."

"Nonsense," her aunt said. "This is your chance. You are not going to be young all your life."

"But …"

"Look at yourself," her aunt's strict face showed little emotion. "You are too pale. Try to smile. It's not an execution. You'll be back home soon if he is not pleased with you. A few weeks away won't kill you."

Miranda wished to cry. Unwilling to give her family the pleasure of pointless tears, she held back. Instead she smiled vacantly.

Miranda had kept to her quarters for the past four days, which was good. He'd rather not see much of her.

Still, if things were to go smoothly Nikolaos needed to talk to her. Aside from a dozen words and their names exchanged at the docks, he had yet to hold a real conversation with the woman. She needed to make a good impression with Darius.

On the morning of the fifth day at sea Nikolaos arrived to pay a visit.

Up close he was surprised to discover Miranda was even prettier than he'd first thought. But her gaze was sad, and it was this, not the strange amber shade of her eyes that caused him to fumble with his words and pause.

"I hope the cabin is to your liking," he said, looking around the cramped quarters.

Miranda sat in a crimson chair, her maid sewing in the background. She said nothing and a painful silence crept around them.

"I know this must all seem strange to you. But a marriage to Darius is a match desired by many women. It would be a lucky alliance," he said.

"What will you obtain from such a lucky alliance?"

"The gratitude of Darius and the money that comes with it."

"And you couldn't find any suitable girl at Asenat?"

"My cousin told me about you. He said you were an unusual beauty. Darius is a demanding man when it comes to women."

Miranda frowned and leaned back, an arm draped across the back of her chair.

"That sounds refreshing," she said.

"Your family could profit from this union."

"You think so?"

"After your failed nuptials this is a golden opportunity."

Through the corner of his eye Nikolaos thought the maid had stopped her sewing for a moment. Miranda leveled her gaze with him, her lips tightly curled in a mocking smile.

"Did your cousin also tell you about that?"

"Bits and pieces."

"Bits and pieces," she repeated. "If you want the plain truth the groom was a drunken sod that died three days before the wedding. Fell off his horse and broke his neck. He was so full of wine I doubt he felt anything at all."

"Tragic. You must have been crushed."

"My uncle was crushed. He spent money on needless preparations," the girl's tone was openly bold now, almost angry. But as she looked at him, it softened a bit. "Golden opportunities seldom are as golden as they appear, Sir Lessar."

"Nikolaos," he ventured.

"Women just don't go from living in an impoverished household to becoming the wives of sweet, kind men who lavish jewels upon them. That fairy tale you spun for my uncle is just that: a fairy tale."

"I never said Darius was sweet, or kind. He is rich and willing to purchase the wife that pleases him the most. And nothing pleases Darius more than beautiful objects, beautiful jewels, beautiful women.

"By helping me you'll help yourself. I know you are not happy with the present situation, but it would be best for both of us if you actually spoke to Darius once you arrive. You've made no attempts at conversation or even the slightest hint of a sympathetic smile with me. While I do not care, he will."

Nikolaos paused. She did not seem convinced, ever so slightly twisting the cuffs of her gown.

"The point is you can become a marchioness," he continued. "Or you can go back home and find yourself some other drunkard. Hopefully, one who does not like to go riding."

Miranda looked away now, sighing.

"Then?" he pressed on.

She gave him a determined, hard look. "My uncle must have mentioned I do not have a dowry. It's a sad situation for any woman. If Darius does not wed me I'd like a dowry upon my return home. And the coins you gave my uncle as a bribe do not count."

"Well," Nikolaos said, chuckling. "If you help me, you can have your dowry. You'll be charming, you'll be sweet, you'll be talkative. Do you agree?"

"I'll be talkative and charming," she replied. "You can't afford sweet."

In the dream, for it must be a dream, the world was burning. As the walls around Miranda were consumed, she stood perfectly still admiring the raging inferno.

The flames licked at her dress but she felt no fear. In fact, she felt no heat. The chamber was strangely cold and she rubbed her arms, shivering.

How odd, she wondered as a tapestry went up in flames and dark smoke clouded her gaze.

She noticed that her left hand had grown black, and her fingers, when she moved them, collapsed into ashes. It was only then that she felt the searing heat and rushed toward the window. She jumped in a vain attempt of escape from the conflagration.

It was a long fall and through it she kept burning, her hair now a crown of fire.

Miranda woke up and stared at the ceiling. For a moment she did not remember where she was, and then it returned like the tide. The ship. The trip. Everything.

It was still three days until they reached port and Miranda pulled the covers over her head.

## 2

The ornate mirror reflected the full-length figure of the woman, her fingers running over the pearl necklace.

"I don't like it."

"It belonged to my grandmother. These are black pearls," Nikolaos said.

"No, it's lovely," Miranda removed the necklace. "I meant meeting him. We just arrived yesterday."

"And he invited me to attend the salon today. You don't refuse Darius."

"I'm not used to it. In Nortre, our household is small. It'll be so different. Besides, I'll stand out in that dress."

Nikolaos had to agree. Miranda's dresses were pitiful and worn gowns. They would not do. He made a mental note to commission some appropriate garments.

"I'm surprised Lord Stesh lets you be seen like this," he said, glancing at the yellow outfit the maid was now holding up for Miranda to inspect.

"What do you know about him?" she asked, her voice turning unkind.

"I know he is very proud and very concerned about the way his family is perceived."

"I've never met my grandfather. My mother's family … he said it wasn't a suitable match. He doesn't speak to us."

Miranda shook her head and the maid sighed, turning to put away the ugly yellow rags in favor of something else.

"Don't mention that to Darius," he said. "Those messy little details…I'd leave them until the wedding date is set."

"You really think I'm going to marry that man?"

"When my cousin told me about you, I knew you were the perfect bride for Darius."

"Poor, desperate and pretty?" she inquired.

Miranda looked at Nikolaos without turning around, instead gazing at his reflection.

The maid had now picked a serious black velvet. It was too simple a dress for Darius, who preferred much more elaborate gowns, but Nikolaos figured it an efficient solution.

"That," he decided quickly. "And the pearls."

Miranda, busy putting a couple of delicate silver hair combs in place, frowned.

She stepped into the room hanging on to Nikolaos like a woman afraid of drowning. Miranda felt silly with her expensive pearls and hair pinned up, walking through a crowd of loud strangers.

In Nortre she stayed at home as much as possible. Salons, even if she had been invited, which was never the case, were strictly forbidden. Her aunt advocated piousness and needlework instead.

She wondered what her aunt would say now, her hand linked to the arm of a man she barely knew. Why, she had been furious about Giustian and he'd known her almost all her life.

Poor Giustian. She couldn't really afford to think about him now since Nikolaos was talking again.

"He likes happy people," Nikolaos muttered. "Smiles and entertainment and wittiness."

She wondered if she could be any of those things.

"Stop fretting. He's right there," Nikolaos warned. "Do not bore him."

As they moved closer she saw him. He was younger and better looking than she'd expected. Miranda shuddered remembering her fiancé. Hadrian's repulsive breath still lingered dangerously close in her memory. But Hadrian was mercifully dead while Darius seemed very much alive.

A pretty woman, standing by Darius' side, caught sight of them first and smiled.

"Nikolaos. You have returned," she said, louder than it was required. "You bring a friend too."

"I do. Lady Miranda, this is my liege, the marquis Darius Lerae. And of course, the Lady Retha."

"I told Darius you were up to something," said the woman playfully. "Here you are appearing out of nowhere with a girl. What *have* you been up to Nikolaos?"

"Nothing exciting. Meeting with relatives."

"Are you family?"

"No," Miranda said quickly. "No, I'm just visiting with Nikolaos for the winter."

"Nikolaos, is she joking? She'll be bored to death. The winter is dreadful at Asenat."

"My uncle thinks it would to do me well to meet with more people my age. I live in Nortre, and since my cousin married, it's a little lonely in our household," she said, as they'd rehearsed. It came out poorly though, the words strained and listless.

It was a story Nikolaos had invented. Saying her uncle basically sold her off to a stranger did not sound adequate.

"Well, Nortre, no wonder. I stopped there once on my way to Lenevo. The whole place has more sheep than people," Retha quipped. "If it weren't for the port, I assure you it would have been deserted decades ago and left for the sheep."

The woman chuckled and Darius was grinning. Miranda glanced at Nikolaos feeling lost.

"I'm glad to see you back," Darius said to Nikolaos, but his face lacked any mirth. "You should have dinner with me and tell me about your trip."

"Of course."

Darius nodded and turned away. He had barely glanced at her. Miranda wasn't sure if he'd known she was even there.

## 3

It was all very different from home. Asenat was a relatively new fortress, built over the remains of a previous, much smaller castle. But what it lacked in age it made up in grace. Decorated wooden panels, painted ceilings, colored glass windows enhanced the edifice.

Most notorious was the garden. In the summer Miranda had been told carved fountains filled with the murmur of water and flowers bloomed all around. For now, the ground was cold and dead.

Sitting next to a stone lion, Miranda shoved some twigs aside with her foot while contemplating the bare soil. In their house at Nortre there had been an interior courtyard with some flower beds. She'd always envied the richer families who could have real gardens with exotic plants instead of a few sad daisies.

Miranda tried to imagine the garden as it would look in the spring. She didn't think she'd remain around long enough to see it.

"You'll freeze," said Darius. "It'll snow soon."

She hadn't noticed him approaching and was startled when he appeared by her side.

"How do you know?" Miranda asked, looking at the sky.

"It's in the air. Like a smell. I'll walk you inside."

Miranda followed him. He didn't speak to her, just kept walking with his eyes squarely focused ahead of them.

"I know you are at the Widow's Tower. Do you like your room?" he asked, as though he remembered conversation would be a polite gesture.

"Yes, I like it."

"I didn't know if it would suit you. I like it there and my guests stay at the Widow's, but some find it a little chilly. It's one of the older parts of the castle and the weather seems to get the best of it. It's a little worn too."

"I really like it. I like everything here. It's all so beautiful."

"I take it you are enjoying your stay then?"

"It's very nice. I always wanted to get away from my home…and you've got peacocks," she blurted.

"Too many sheep, not enough peacocks?"

His voice was deadpan serious and she had trouble knowing how to react. "Among other things."

"The peacocks make the most horrible shrill screams."

"I'd still like to see one."

"In the spring we let them roam around the gardens."

He was smiling now, a sliver of a grin creeping upon his face.

"This conversation is difficult" he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it would be rude if I stared, so I try not to, and talk about nonsense instead. It's not working."

She blushed. Miranda was unused to compliments. More often than not what had been hurled at her were insults.

"Thank you," she said.

"Don't be shy. Every time I see you, you are hiding behind Nikolaos or your hair, or Nikolaos and your hair. Like now, you do it already. It's not becoming."

"Habits die hard," she muttered.

"You'll need some new habits then."

She liked that idea.

Roses. So many roses around her. Spinning, Miranda laughed as she looked at the crimson petals between her hands. It was a blur of red all around.

She held up a flower. Strangely, the flower shifted and it was no longer a rose. She was holding a ball of fire in her hands.

Miranda let out a loud shriek, dropping it quickly and spun around as the rose bushes burned. Her dress had caught on fire too.

She was burning when she woke up and rushing from her bed, down the stairs and into the chilly night air, she felt her skin smolder like in the dream.

Miranda closed her eyes. Her heart pounded loudly. For a moment, it hurt to breathe as she pressed her palms against her temples.

"What's wrong?" asked Nikolaos.

She opened her eyes and he was standing in front of her.

"What's wrong?" he asked again and Miranda realized she'd been crying.

"A nightmare," she said.

A snowflake lodged in Miranda's hair and she shivered. More flakes started falling around them as Nikolaos put an arm around her shoulders.

## 4

Suspended above them, a sun of solid gold and a moon made of silver drifted slowly across a jewel encrusted sky. Miranda spun and her reflection whirled in the tall mirrors that filled the walls of the chamber.

"It's so beautiful," she said.

"I suppose, for someone's who's not used to it. To me it's boring and predictable," Darius muttered.

"You are arrogant," she chided.

"I'm honest," he corrected her. "Do you like it?"

Miranda looked at the mechanical peacocks and nodded her appreciation. At the same time she felt a little cheated. Everything was a bit artificial in Darius' life so she should have imagined this would be too. Yet she had believed they would see real, live peacocks. Darius said these were better.

"It's all very nice."

"It's called the Summer Room. It's always summer here, even when the weather outside might say the contrary."

No windows, only mirrors and painted nature scenes served to maintain the illusion of an eternal season. A large fountain in the center of the chamber was surrounded by tiny mechanical birds that cooed and flapped their wings.

"The king has a similar chamber, only much larger. In it there is an artificial lake with tiny boats. Golden statues of nymphs are placed all around and beautiful women dressed as mermaids play musical instruments."

"You know him? The king?"

"His eldest son is a friend of mine. When we were children I was his constant playmate at court and in later years we sparred more than once during sword practice."

Her uncle would have been impressed. He always said Miranda should go to court, that she belonged somewhere else. Fervent letters were sent to her grandfather, begging him to install Miranda in "her proper place", her uncle's exact words. Lord Stesh never responded. A position at court might have assured her a good marriage. In Nortre she was doomed to an

unworthy alliance.

"Why aren't you at court then?"

"Because I have been there already and have no need of it. And because you are here instead of there," Darius said. It was almost chivalrous, except that teasing little smirk of his contradicted his polite words.

His compliments still tended to catch her by surprise even though she was no stranger to them by now. Darius was always speaking of her beauty and her grace and such. In contrast, Nikolaos spoke little and never praised her, always courteous without being gallant.

At the thought of this, Nikolaos and his charming politeness, she smiled.

Her life had fallen into a pleasant pattern. She would have breakfast early and then, usually by noon, she would be greeted by Darius or asked to meet with him for a salon, or a walk, or to eat, or anything he could come up with.

She had discovered Darius was quick tempered, vain, witty, and oddly sweet at times. She liked him because it was hard not to like Darius even if he had a cruel side.

Nikolaos, the other stable force in her life, could never be cruel. He behaved properly at all times, like a true nobleman.

She was meeting Nikolaos for dinner that night and as she smoothed her new crimson dress and glanced at her reflection she thought it might be him at the door.

But then her maid walked in and explained it was a lady Retha and Miranda frowned.

"Let her in," she said.

She didn't know Retha well enough except to understand she was refined and beautiful and showed little interested in Miranda.

Retha smiled and kissed Miranda on the cheek as was customary and then the two women sat across from each other, a tiny black table between them.

Miranda clasped her hands tightly as hushed words strained to escape her throat.

"It is…she said she will tell him about my grandfather. About my parents' marriage, and how Lord Stesh disowned my father and does not recognize me as his grandchild. She said I must leave quickly or she will tell him everything."

Nikolaos merely glanced at the fire burning next to them. "Retha wants Darius for herself. She fears you."

"I think I ought to fear her, seeing what she plans to say about me. I can not stay anymore, Nikolaos. I must go home before she speaks to him."

"Don't be silly."

"I must go," the girl insisted.

Nikolaos had observed enough blackmailing and backstabbing to render him immune to petty little threats but she was not used to this.

"Let her talk then. Your lineage is a little murky, so what?" he said. "Bastard children have wed full-blooded nobles, and you are not a bastard girl. A humble family and lack of dowry never killed anyone."

"It is not only that. She said she'd also tell him some other things."

Nikolaos paused, concerned. "What other things?"

Miranda stared at him. Her eyes were pretty and full of guilt.

"Stories about my family and…about me."

"Tell me then."

"I don't want to. I just want to go."

"Tell me," he pressed on, his voice growing gruff.

For an instant he thought she would refuse, but she started speaking, first just a whisper so that he had to struggle to catch every word.

"One of my ancestors was Karion, a warrior-lord back in the days when the emperor still ruled. Karion was one of many commanders waging wars in the emperor's name and in those days their strongest enemies were the Azeians, who controlled the Archipelagos.

"There was a fortress in the Archipelagos and it was the home of a wizard-king. The king had acquired the services of a demon which resided in an enchanted mirror. My ancestor laid siege to the magician's fortress until his men swept in.

"The wizard-king had an only daughter. During the struggle she had locked herself inside her chambers. But it did her no good. Karion and his men broke the door down.

"He violated the wizard's daughter and gave her to his men afterwards. He killed the wizard yet spared her life because she would make a pretty slave. But the girl, being the wizard's daughter, had some knowledge of her father's magic. When Karion arrived with a golden collar to place around her neck as befit a slave she spoke a curse.

"She invoked the demon in the mirror and swore it would plague his family. Bad luck would befall his children. But the women, she reserved a special punishment for them. Any daughter of his blood would be damned. Every man that attempted to get close to a female of his lineage would be in peril and any man who loved one would die, killed by the demon.

"Karion executed the woman. He did not believe in curses but in a fit of superstition, he destroyed the wizard's mirror. No ill luck befell Karion and he amassed riches and lands and in time had two daughters and a son.

"All was well. When his oldest child, his daughter, turned thirteen his luck seemed to turn. He fell from the emperor's favour and felt ill, a lingering malady that wouldn't leave him. His son was killed by brigands. Debts started to mount.

"He managed to wed his daughter to a young nobleman of a good house. Two months later the groom was dead. Because his daughter was still young and pretty another match was arranged. This second groom died, having lasted less than a season.

"Rumours of Karion's curse spread quickly. It is a story that is still told in my home town, and it is the reason why no man dared come near me."

Her story finished, Miranda glanced down. "My father died," she said. "And then my mother went mad. She would…she would say terrible things about me and she'd hurt me … she tried to burn down our home. I am cursed. It is the truth."

"You shouldn't think about morbid wives' tales," Nikolaos said.

"It's the truth. My fiancé died days before our wedding."

"The drunkard who fell off a horse?"

"Don't make fun of me. It is real. The demon knew ... It does wicked things."

"Aside from murder, can it do some mending? I've some shirts that…"

"Don't joke about it. It could be here. I'm sure it's here," she said, pressing a hand against his mouth.

With Miranda so close to him it made thinking of demons rather difficult. As if reaching the same conclusion she drew away.

"There's no one here except you and me," he assured her. "There's nothing supernatural in this room. Retha won't say a word because I know some stories about her that she wouldn't like told either. So everything will continue as normal."

"I'm not sure I know the meaning of normal," she whispered.

There was something heartbreakingly lovely in Miranda. It tugged at his heartstrings and without really wanting to he circled her shoulders with his arm and she rested her head against him.

He felt rather guilty. After all, she was nothing but a piece of bait. At the same time she was a very sad and lonely girl.

He was sick and he had asked her to visit him for a game of cards. He played all kinds of board and card games and fancied intricate puzzles. Miranda, having spent a lifetime trapped inside her uncle's household, had become adept at puzzles and card games.

This pleased him.

"There, on the table," he said as a greeting. "I've placed all the pieces already."

Miranda nodded, glancing at the beautiful gold and silver board. Darius lay in the center of a massive bed, propped up by crimson cushions.

"This is lovely," she said.

"It's not so much when you have a cold."

She walked around his spacious chamber in awe. There was too much of everything, excess as natural to Darius as breathing. Miranda paused before a small portrait of a young woman, half hidden behind an ornamental silver box.

"She's pretty" she said turning towards him. "Who is she?"

When she showed him the little painting, Darius shifted irritably.

"That is an unpleasant memory that I keep tucked away," Darius grimaced. "Only the idiotic maids must have been dusting and fidgeting with my things again."

"Who is she?"

"She was my wife. She died three years ago. I would rather not discuss her," he replied.

"Oh," Miranda mumbled. "I didn't know you'd been married. How did she die?"

"She died, does it matter?" he said, his voice growing harsh and loud. "Dead and buried."

"I'm sorry," was her response.

It was not enough. She had stirred the darkness in him. Now the darkness blazed back at her. Uncertain, she felt herself flush, mortified.

"Out," he ordered.

She took a first weak step.

"Out!" he yelled.

For a brief moment she recalled the chorus of boys gathered outside their home at night. 'Witch spawn' they'd taunt, and say other things she couldn't make out. Sometimes, even in broad daylight on their way to the butcher's or the shrine of Our Lady of Lilies, she would catch hushed words.

Their smug faces, the same face Darius now sported, made her quiver with fury. She wanted them all to choke on their fat tongues.

For a second she wished *he* would choke and it was that thought that sent her spinning away. It was that thought which frightened her.

He spoke again, as she reached the door.

"Wait," he said, and his voice was different.

She stopped and turned around. His bitterness was still there, although it seemed to have diluted a little.

"Sit down," he muttered.

She edged closer to him but decided not to sit, instead stopping at the foot of his bed.

"She was unhappy. She killed herself. It's a simple story," he said.

Miranda looked down, her hands neatly hidden against the folds of her dress.

"When I was a child," she said, hesitating for the briefest instant, "my mother jumped from a high window and killed herself. She was very unhappy too."

He did not say anything and she glanced up. He was staring at her in an odd way.

"When I met you, I knew there was something different about you. I guess I recognize in you the same tragedy in me."

It was her turn to struggle for words, but thankfully he filled the void.

"Let's play," he suggested.

Outside it was a bitter winter that slashed at the windows and nipped the flesh. But inside there was fantasy and make-believe and it was any season they desired and any land that pleased them.

Darius showed her a pet leopard with a jeweled collar that he kept in an ornate cage. He organized a dinner where all the dishes were red and all guests wore crimson. He gave her a grand tour of the library and they peered over ancient tomes and he allowed her to look at some old books of magic incantations. Then he showed her a secret book, a hidden treasure.

"It was my grandfather's grimoire," he told her. "He was a warlock. But you must keep that little tidbit a secret."

"Do you know any magic?" she asked as a jest.

"A little. Not enough to protect me against you," he responded.

She chuckled and then he chuckled, and he showed her another book. A beautiful illustrated tome with beasts from exotic lands. He pointed out a unicorn and told her he could find one for her.

## 5

In the dream it was him, not her mother, falling from the tower while everything burned. The tapestries and the armoire went up in flames and Miranda woke up, a whimper escaping her lips.

The mirror across the room reflected her pale figure. There was nothing in its clear reflection except a scared young woman.

"What was she like, his wife?"

"She was sweet," muttered Nikolaos. "She was beautiful."

"He loved her very much, didn't he? I could see the deep loss in his eyes … I like him and I can not remain here. I was dishonest, Nikolaos. I did not tell you everything."

She was standing by the window while the snow fell outside, a hand lightly splayed against the glass. Under the dim light of his chamber, with the snow framing her, she seemed ghostly.

"There was a boy I knew, Giustan. He was one of the few people who were not afraid of me. All the other boys would hurl rocks at my window shutters during the night. But he wouldn't. He

was sweet. My uncle said he was also unworthy of attention because he didn't have much money.

"Still, he'd come around with excuses to see me or we'd meet by chance on my way to the market. I liked him very much. One night he was attacked by someone, some thief my uncle said. It was a vicious thing. They burnt the body, it was so badly mangled.

He was fifteen when he died."

Nikolaos moved closer to her. From that angle, her eyes seemed almost burning yellow, like a candle flame.

"You think it was your fault. It is a coincidence."

"Is it?" she asked, tossing the question back at him.

He picked his words carefully. "You should be thinking of other things. Happy things. You should be smiling and forgetting about old stories."

"Every time I look in the mirror I feel like it's there. Like I'm being watched," she whispered.

An unintentional shiver ran down his spine and for a moment Nikolaos was revolted by the sight of her. Then she turned toward him, wiping stray tears from her eyes and there was only a sad woman there, no storybook monster.

"It's a tale," he said. "Just some old tale."

"An old tale," she whispered. "What if it isn't? I don't want Darius to be hurt."

"Fallen in love, have we?" he muttered.

Miranda shrugged as she twisted a strand of hair around her finger.

"At first I thought you'd fetched me off for some repulsive pig, but he's not. He's actually charming. I fear that he'd be harmed. Or you."

"Yes, yes, we know this evil demon will kill us all."

"Yes, and I must leave," she said. "I must leave before you are hurt. It knows what I'm thinking, I can feel it. It's in my dreams. Every night, when I go to bed. It knows."

He did not want to, would not have her speaking like that. It was too dreadful, her vacant expression. Like a porcelain doll with glass eyes. So he embraced her instead, pressing her tight against him just to get those terrible doll eyes to leave him.

She cried freely and it didn't help the situation at all. He was bad with weeping women and found himself mumbling silly words of comfort, smoothing her hair as she held on to him.

The sobs diminished and when those eyes did look up at him again she seemed better, a trembling smile fluttering on her face.

"Thank you," she said in a whisper.

Nikolaos grunted a muffled sound that did not amount to a real word, feeling absolutely awkward and misplaced. Thank you for what? He was no friend of hers and if she could see into his heart she would do well to recoil.

But it was evident she was oblivious to his true nature the moment he felt a hesitant kiss.

A bit shocked Nikolaos did not react at first, then kissed her back because he wanted to, and had wanted it for a while now.

A splinter of jealousy dug into his soul every time he saw her with Darius. He pushed that jealousy aside, ignored the itching pressure inside his throat because she was for Darius.

But thoughts about Darius were quickly stripped aside. He kissed Miranda and she wrapped her arms around him, pressed herself into his body.

A flicker of sanity reaching his muddled mind, Nikolaos pulled back and stared at her.

"No," he said hoarsely. "Never."

She seemed hurt and ashamed as she rushed out. He was tempted to stop her for a

moment. But he couldn't.

## 6

Miranda carefully avoided Nikolaos for the next few days. It had been a rather silly thing to do. Because if the story was true, and she'd thought it was, then she was placing his life in danger with that kiss. She wasn't even sure why she'd kissed him. Perhaps she was being bold, trying to prove the stories false. Maybe she was feeling lonely. Or perhaps she'd merely needed it.

She closed her book and glanced at Darius who lay on a regal looking chair, his feet propped up on another chair.

"Do you think spells can be broken?" she asked.

"What kind of spells?" he muttered.

"A curse."

"My grandfather said any curse can be undone, although undoing it can have a high price."

"I wish your grandfather was here."

"He's been dead for the past five years. But if it's magic you want I'll take you to Trivek. There are small dragons there that swim in the rivers and cry pearl tears."

"That's a lie," she said sadly.

Darius walked up to her, abandoning his book. The library was growing darker and she didn't want to be there anymore, surrounded by so many shadows.

"If you don't want to go to Trivek I'll take you somewhere else."

"Take me to Nortre," she said, afraid of his nearness.

"Back to that sheep-infested hole you despise?"

"I need to go home. I belong somewhere else."

"Surely not in the middle of nowhere herding along a flock."

Darius chuckled. She did not laugh, turning to leave. He caught her arm, his face growing composed and serious.

"Stay," he said. "We can get you those dragon pearls and sail on a barge. I'll make you queen…"

"I don't want pearls, I don't want a barge. You are always offering things you do not have, all these fancy tales and lies. Nothing is real."

"Who needs real?" he said with disdain. "It isn't all fancy tales either. But stay for the tales if you wish. I do my best to entertain you."

"I'd like to go," she said.

"You are not a prisoner. You may leave any time you want. But if you've come all this way just to give me up before I solemnly ask for your hand in marriage, then you are a bit of a fool."

He was smiling again. It was a different kind of smile though. It had an edge.

"It's the whole reason Nikolaos has dragged you here, isn't it? Don't feel bad. Many other men have piled their nieces, daughters and even mistresses at my feet hoping I'd pick one of them. To tell you the truth I think marriage doesn't suit me, but what do I know?" he chuckled. "I like you though."

The conversation was so odd and Miranda felt that she should just go. She stayed instead.

She tried to appear dignified. Instead, she succeeded in looking like a flustered child and stammered, forgetting her well rehearsed speech.

Worse, Nikolaos stared at her without uttering a word for what seemed forever until she couldn't take it anymore.

"Well?" she blabbered.

"I'm extremely pleased," he said.

His face, drawn and stark, displayed little joy.

"It's what you wanted," Miranda said. "All this time you've been telling me how I must marry the man. Now the man wants to marry me."

"Then you will marry."

"Yes, I guess it's a very simple decision for you."

"We discussed it. We talked about it at length."

"I know."

"Then why are you acting like this? As though you didn't know this would be the natural conclusion."

"It is all very easy for you."

"Could we spare each other the melodrama?" Nikolaos asked. "It is not as if this is some terrible bargain."

"No, it's not a terrible bargain. I'm sure you will also obtain some nice trinkets. A new title, some jewels. The little things one gets when he sells a woman."

"If you want to act the part of the victim you may. I know you are happy."

"Of course I'm happy. You brought me here, and for the first time in my life I'm not alone," she said. "Everything is different. *I* want to be different. I want to pretend I'm not a monster. And it's your fault. You've made me want this."

The few paces between them seemed like an endless void and Miranda's heart flinched in pain. She moved towards the opposite side of the room because she had to do something to prevent the pain from tearing her apart and she could think of nothing more.

"I should tell him yes then, is that what I should do?" she asked.

"Of course," he grunted.

"I could still…I would still go if you wanted," Miranda said, feeling bold. "You could take me anywhere. I'd go."

Nikolaos' eyes held nothing.

"No," he said.

## 7

Miranda defied the winter in a gown of yellow decorated with tiny green vines. She sparkled, sitting next to her summer lord, while the others chattered. And she did not look at him. Her gaze seemed to skip him, evading his seat, although he was in plain sight.

Nikolaos drank and simmered. A scant few meters from him Darius was holding her hand, whispering something to her ear.

He thought of another party, another occasion when the marquis had asked them to lift

their cups for the woman he would marry. He downed his wine. Its sweet taste lingered in his mouth.

This was no official engagement. But Darius, impulsive as always, had decided he must have a small celebration to show his choice of a bride. Later they would go through the drudgery of official announcements and plans. Today was a feast of Darius' ego, for he must show her off, like a man a parading a prize horse.

"We should toast to Nikolaos," Darius said, a little drunk by now. "For finding this unique woman, the best bride there can be."

Unique. Of course she was unique. Such a pretty deadly thing.

Darius thought she was his, when Nikolaos knew she'd wanted him instead. The problem was, despite the lingering dread in his heart every time he glanced at Miranda, Nikolaos wanted her too.

Her maid had asked permission to toast to her engagement with some of the other servants and Miranda agreed. Her aunt would have disapproved of this decision, but Miranda didn't care anymore.

After her maid left, she tossed a blanket over the mirror, blocking her reflection from sight.

Miranda brushed her hair, running the comb through a knot and glanced at the hidden mirror, like an eye suddenly gone blind.

She woke up with a start, the nightmare still clinging to her. In the dream she had seen him fall, tumble towards a never ending abyss.

There was another knock at the door and Miranda rose, still confused from her dreams, her bare feet making no sound.

Miranda opened the door and Nikolaos was there. She felt herself smile.

## 8

She was lighting more candles. The dim glow of the room created odd shadows as she drifted, her hair unbound.

"Stop that," he ordered, uncomfortable with all her nervous pacing. "I can see fine."

"Well then?" she asked, going back to his side. "What is it?"

"You have some wine?"

"No," she said, folding her arms. "What is it?"

He found his voice, and it was calm. It all came out easily.

"In three nights' time I will be leaving this place. You must be ready to come with me then."

Miranda stared at him in disbelief and shook her head. "Are you mad?"

"No."

"Everything is as you wanted. I am marrying him, and now you want me to leave?"

"It is complicated. I've done something wrong, Miranda, something very wrong."

"What?" she whispered.

His eyes darted towards the shadows, away from her. He couldn't make himself look at

her.

"Darius, his wife…I did know his wife, I knew her well. We were in love … only he wanted her. There was nothing she could do; her family agreed to the marriage and they were wed.

"She did not love him. She loved me, and I loved her back. She feared Darius. She told me he could be a terrible man. Darius and I fought together during the campaign at Lavart. He was cruel in battle, but isn't that natural when facing your enemy?

"There had been a prostitute at Lavart. Darius decked her in jewels, made her his official mistress. Eventually they quarreled. He was displeased with her and wanted her gone. He didn't have to worry about her much longer since she died suddenly.

"I never thought much about the incident. Many people died during the campaign, what was one prostitute? I thought about it later. I thought about it when Darius' wife died too."

Miranda drew her breath in sharply. "Are you saying Darius killed them?"

"She committed suicide. Elara would have never committed suicide," Nikoalos said. "She told me she was afraid of him. Then she kills herself? No. No, she wouldn't have."

"You are making it up."

"They said she cut her wrists, but I know he did it. He was jealous. He was mad."

"You've made it up."

"I knew the story you told me, about the curse. It's the reason why I wanted to meet you," Nikolaos said. "It's the real reason why I brought you here. I couldn't kill him myself without endangering my family so I had to use you to kill him. I knew the story was true. He would just die a mysterious death and it would be over."

"Stop lying!"

"It is the truth"

"It is a lie!"

She let out a low, angry shriek and whirled away from him, holding onto one of the bedposts. He expected her to weep. She clung to the post instead.

"You made me believe it was just a story. I never believed it until you came along…that I could just be like everyone else," her words low and harsh in the semi-darkness, her back turned toward him. "You were afraid, weren't you? That's why."

"Why what?"

"That day you wouldn't kiss me. You were afraid of the curse."

"Yes, I was afraid," he admitted.

She chuckled, releasing the bedpost and sliding away. "Some honesty. That is nice."

"It was wrong of me to deceive you. But I thought it wouldn't matter. I didn't know you then. I thought you were just a weapon for me to use."

"What now? You try to buy your redemption? Darius lives, the creature is sent back to its cage?"

"I have friends in Kire. I thought I could take you there, as a start. After that, I am not sure."

She broke down crying and he held her as she rocked against him like a grieving child.

## 9

She kept making mistakes. Stupid little mistakes. She was nervous, thoughts of Kire blurring the drawings in the card.

Miranda knew she must be cold and composed. Nikolaos said the trip would remain their secret. Darius should not know or he might try to stop them.

So she played cards with the marquis in the Summer Room, accompanied by the mechanical peacocks.

"I win again," Darius said with a sly smile.

She pressed her cards down and smiled back. "Only because you cheat."

"Only because you are distracted."

Miranda laced her hands together. "I'm thirsty," she said.

"Well, then we'd better have some more wine," he suggested, filling her glass.

She'd already had too much to drink but felt no desire to refuse him.

"Your face, Miranda, it's such an honest face," Darius said as he handed her the glass. "It can hold few secrets. Do you think I have not guessed it?"

Miranda stared at him, the glass precariously balanced between her fingers.

He leaned closer to her. "There will be no escape tomorrow night," he said.

She scrambled to her feet, a tangled, terrified mass of nerves. He appeared amused, his characteristic little grin extending and growing into an authentic smile.

"It is rather annoying, you know? Nikolaos always seems to be trying to steal my women. My first wife, now the second one too. I wonder what the hell they see in him. Do sit down and finish that."

Miranda clutched the forgotten glass but took a step away instead.

"You killed her."

"My adored wife was a fool who liked to kiss her Nikolaos in damp, dark corners. However, I didn't lay a finger on her."

"That's not true."

"I do not lie," he said moving to her side and plucking the wine from her hands. "If anything it's Nikolaos and you who are guilty of playing me false. Fortunately I have known from the start exactly what you are."

"What do you mean?"

"Retha told me some tales. Meaningless gossip most of it. Except for a tiny part. An old story. It made me think. It reminded me of some other stories. I told you my grandfather was interested in magic, didn't I? He knew all kinds of stories about many types of demons. In particular I remember the *Ashakari Veldar*. The tainted ones."

He took a sip from the glass, offering it back to her. Miranda recoiled.

"Demons can be very useful friends. You are lucky."

"Lucky," she scoffed.

"Yes, to have met me. You thought I was jesting when I said I know magic, but it's true. My grandfather controlled several demons, as do I. I did not kill my wife, the demons merely drove her mad."

"How convenient."

"Don't be a hypocrite," Darius said with a sigh. "How many people have you killed?"

"I haven't killed anyone," she said.

"That fiancé, no? Did you wish it very badly? Did you stay awake at nights and ask your little friend to take his life? It listened, didn't it?"

She had hated him. The pig, always trying to touch her. That night she had wished

Hadrian would break his neck and she had placed her hands against the cool surface of the mirror and prayed for it.

*I wish you would die.*

A muffled sob escaped her throat. Miranda pressed a hand against her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut. She tried to will away the memory but it was etched inside her head.

*I wish you would die.*

"I know you," Darius said. "I would have recognized you anywhere."

"We are not the same," she muttered, opening her eyes.

He held her chin up, as if to have a better look at her and Miranda slapped the hand away. He answered by seizing her wrist and pulling her closer to him, their foreheads touching and his breath upon her face.

"Let me go," she blurted.

"Where? With dear Nikolaos? He's a little bland." Darius smirked. "He's terrified of you and yet he is consumed with desire. Unable to make a choice, whether to kill or take you, he's resorted to abandoning you in some far off shore. What is his plan? Are you being delivered to a nunnery?"

She trembled and inhaled slowly, trying to steady her racing heart.

"I would kill you or I would lay with you, but I wouldn't stand in between. You pick a road, Miranda, and you follow it," he said, and then whispering as though it were an afterthought. "We need each other."

"I don't want what you can teach me," she said. But it was a lie.

## 10

He waited, the snow drifting in a mad dance. Then he saw her slipping towards him, face tucked under the folds of a black hood.

"Hello," she said, shivering.

"You are late," he motioned toward their horses.

The weather was deteriorating quickly and he feared they would be found in the morning dead and frozen if they didn't leave now. He hurried towards his own mount only to discover Miranda was standing in the same spot.

"Come on," he urged her.

"I can't," she said quickly.

"Miranda, you have to come."

"I can't," she repeated.

Dumbfounded, he stared at her, the reins hanging from his hand.

"You should go very far, as far as you can," she said, with an odd calmness. "Never come back. Do you understand?"

"Miranda," he said. "What is this?"

"A gift, for me. But he will not show you such kindness again. If you are wise, head beyond Kire. Some place where magic is long gone."

He shook his head, a small, mute gesture of denial.

She slid her arms around him, pressing her lips onto his. Her fingers were digging

painfully into his shoulders, but he didn't protest. He kissed her back instead.

It didn't last and she was gone, her retreating footsteps quickly erased by the snow.

## Epilogue

He had pictured the court and the king in his mind, but nothing could compare to the sumptuous display that greeted him, the dazzling array of noblemen and the luxurious glimmer of jewels and gold.

Feeling shabby even in his most sumptuous attire, the young lord sank down in a graceful bow.

"Your highness, my lord Darius," he said and glanced up at the man on the lion throne. At his side sat his queen.

He had not been able to picture the queen during his daily musings. Now that she was before him, he was unable to stop looking at her. Her eyes appeared to be molten gold and his breath caught in his throat, amazed at her strange beauty.

"Do not stare too much, young man," said the king with a little smile, "for she is like the sun, and may burn you blind."

The lord glanced down quickly, feeling ashamed.

Lady Miranda, in turn, placed her hand upon her king's arm.

## The End

*Silvia Moreno-Garcia grew up in Mexico wanting to be a writer. Eventually, she moved to Vancouver, BC, where she works for a post-production company and tries to fight the lure of fantasy fiction. She lives with her husband, son and two cats.*

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continued from page 19

"Be silent," Radamistus said. "Have faith in the providence of Aster. He will deliver you from this church to the Tier of Aster. You will exchange clothes with my servant, Branhe, when he arrives."

"What?" he said with an angry snarl.

"A disguise, Jorganon. A disguise. You cannot leave here on a bird's wing, after all. You will look and be a Nasturtium until you reach the Tier of Aster. Be strong and courageous, and I will join you in my manor in a few days."

"But I demand to know how..."

"You have very little to worry about, Jorganon. Be calm. Remove your tunic and pants and sword. You cannot bear one now."

"I am a noble of the sword."

Radamistus sighed and Branhe chose that moment to enter. The Deconeus was tall, but he looked harried. His gray hair and beard were salted through, but his eyebrows were dark and his eyes penetrating. "You are a renegade and a condemned traitor. I am bringing you to freedom."

"The Tier of Aster is freedom, is it? It's more like the Steene."

"If that is the cell you would prefer, I will gladly arrange it for you." He glowered at Jorganon. "Never forget that I shelter you at great risk to myself. And I can revoke that protection still. You have sworn the Abjuration oath, yet you remain as stubborn as you did to the Sovereign of Minya. You will find, my banished Mark of Alvaron, that I am not nearly as patient or forgiving as your last liege lord. If you would prefer, I shall leave you here to anticipate the King's verdict on the morrow. The choice is certainly yours."

"No, I will go," Jorganon said with a huff. "Here's my shirt, take it all!" He stripped off his tunic. He had a strong, muscular build, one of a trained warrior. Scars knotted on his arms and breast.

Branhe quietly disrobed as well and they exchanged garments. As Jorganon put on the black robes of the Nasturtium, he fetched a long-bladed knife from his belt sheath. "Thasos Walkelin trained me. I keep this. I never go unarmed."

"You will not need it."

"I will take it," Jorganon said, stubbornness blooming on his face.

"Very well," Radamistus said. "Now heed me carefully. You must obey my words." He rose and approached the Mark. Branhe reached out to the Deconeus with the magic of Deep Isme, invoking a sigh and hiss of coldness into the room. They had partnered many times, knew each others strengths and weaknesses. For each other, and only for each other, they abandoned all defenses of the mind. Branhe was privy to all of the Deconeus' many secrets. Certainly the man could have kept him out—he knew of all the runes and relics to do so. But they trusted each other and their thoughts flowed freely between them.

*He is an insufferable wretch.*

*Yes, but he's important to us. Be patient with him.*

*Patience is for those with little better to do with their time. But I obey, Radamistus.*

*You summoned the blacksmith—good. He deserves a stinging rebuke.*

*He will meet me at Rosekemp Church in the Tier of Median. He will escort the Mark of Brainlessness to the Tier.*

*Be certain he does not harm the man. He is jealous, that one.*

*He cares for the girl this one abused. I can hardly blame him. Jealous he may be, but he is a useful tool. I would like to begin teaching him the Way.*

*Yes. We need to know if he's betrayed us. Probe him well, Branhe. Ferret out his secrets.*

Branhe noticed that the Deconeus was a few inches taller than Jorganon as he stood breast to breast with the man. Radamistus' voice was the smallest of whispers. "Listen to my words, Jorganon, to my soft spoken tones." The chill lingered in the air, grew sharper. The powers of Isme rushed through Branhe's skin, chilling him. But he was used to the cold now, as it seeped into his bones, threatening to change him to ice.

"You will not be able to speak until you reach the Tier of Aster. I cloud your mind, your thoughts, that you may pass the time as if in a drunken stupor." Radamistus passed his hand over the Mark's face, the ring of his finger glowing an opaque black. The Mark's eyes glazed over, his shoulders sagged. "You will follow the directions of Master Gabe Finch; do what he tells you. When you reach my manor house in the Tier of Aster, your awareness will be your own again." The Mark's eyes closed and he breathed deeply. "I grant you strength to bear the journey, and silence that you may not speak to a soul. I change your face..."

Radamistus waved his hand again, the tendons beneath his skin taut, the veins protruding like worms, and Branhe watched as the features of the Mark, the nose and eyebrows shifted and changed, transforming the man into an exact replica of himself. It sickened him, the way his face contorted and shaped, like potter's clay, but it was done in a moment. The disguise would fool anyone.

"There," Radamistus said.

Branhe bowed his head and let the magic transform him as well. When he looked up at the silver-gilt mirror on the far wall, he found the image of the Mark of Alvaron looking back at him instead. He tugged on the man's tunic and gloves, strapping the saber to his waist.

"I am ready," Branhe said, coughing to arrange his voice. "I will escape tomorrow after the King's verdict is out, regardless of its hostility. The Espion will never know that the Mark dwells with us in Aster."

"Be cautious, my friend," Radamistus said. The use of the magic had drained him. He reached for a cup and poured himself some steaming wine. "The Espion will hope to kill you in flight." He took a hasty swallow.

"Fear not for my life, Radamistus. I intend to kill a few before I abandon the charade. I hope that Warnock wretch is one of them."

"There will be many deaths soon, if all comes to pass as the stars foretold. I think Jevin is ignorant thus far."

"As well he should be. They still do not know the true reason why Kalisha left the Tier of Premye. Do they?"

A small smile twisted on the Deconeus' mouth. "All in good time, my friend. All in good time. The day is coming when the wrath of Aster will be poured out in full measure upon this city. How I long for that day." He took another drink of wine and set the goblet down on the velvet. His expression was distant, haunted almost.

"We have foreseen it, Deconeus. It's only a matter of time now before it is obvious to all."

# Chapter One

Middlehan Court
Tier of Median

Jaylin Warnock tugged on the soft leather boot until his heel and foot fit snugly within. Glancing down at his finger, he removed the Espion ring that glittered with an emerald. Cupping it in his hand, he stared a moment at the stone set on a silver band. The memory of earning it still brought a smile to his mouth and a twitch to his scarred cheek. After tucking it safely within one of the many hidden pouches beneath the boot cuff, he straightened. The sound of horses filled the courtyard street and a bolt of fear brought memories with it. Hurrying to the door, he made sure the bolts and crossbars were in place and parted the curtain.

It was only Thasos and a few of his guardsmen.

Releasing the locks and bars, he swung it open as the captain ambled up the steps, his reddish gold hair muted in the early morning hours.

"A wonderful disguise as always," the Atabyrion captain said with solemnity, his eyes twinkling as he looked Jaylin up and down. "You look like any number of brainless Aster devotees coming to confess their many sins. Just remember to buy one of those cockleshell pendants. I've heard that the gulls won't squap on you then."

"It's a wonder the Nasturtium wear dark robes," Jaylin said in return, delighted to see his friend. "I imagine they stain very easily."

That earned a laugh from Thasos, which wasn't that difficult to do. They'd been friends since Jaylin's first week in the City of Minya. Not only were they from the same country, but they both appreciated the ironies of Minya with the same cynical eye. Of course, it also helped that their employers were blood enemies. Thasos worked for the Queen of Minya. Jaylin had sworn loyalty to Prince Jevin.

Thasos entered and brushed his hands. "Do you know how early I had to rouse my men to get down here from the Palace? You should be impressed that I'm sober enough to see you off this morning."

"Then you only had two kegs of mead instead of three? My friend, I think you're starting to reform. Don't you dare!"

"If you don't watch that tongue of yours," he said with a grin, "I'm going to leave the Markess of Croy with a little note on how to find you. She's badgered me again to reveal where you've been hiding since the last King's Will months ago. She's been...how shall I put this… *impatient* to make your acquaintance."

Jaylin laughed and crossed his arms. "Tell Moira I'm flattered but I have enough scars." He motioned towards the one on his cheek and the one by his ear. "I know she desires me, Thasos. Who can blame the woman. Can I help being this good looking? It's a curse, truly."

The captain nodded and rubbed his lip. "Yes, but there is a cure. A couple legion sheriffs with their truncheons...we'd have you ugly enough to pass off as a sack of turnips. Really, it's very inexpensive too. I'm sure I could find men who would do the service for free."

"You are wicked this early in the morning, Thasos. Remind me of that before I forewarn you of one of my adventures. I'll return in a few days. Unless the Deconeus of Aster is still sulking about the last King's Will session and arrests me."

"You'll want to avoid Radamistus, I think. Goading him twice would be foolish."

"Probably so. I'll meet you back in Premye, after I find Kalisha. The Sovereign of Minya still misses her and I promised I'd find her again."

"If you can."

Jaylin withdrew the knife in his belt, flipped it around and caught it by the handle. He set it down on the dining room table next to a basket of pears and cutlery. "I have a few ideas how to accomplish that."

"You and your Espion ways. I'd rather not know how you intend to find her. But for your journey to the Tier of Aster. Taking Runner's Bridge? Or were you intending to swim there?" Thasos' eyebrows arched mockingly.

"Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever actually *crossed* Runner's Bridge end to end. The last time, I had to jump and swim ashore."

"So you like to continually boast. Just remember to give yourself enough time. The King's Will meets again in a fortnight. Unless you plan to stay down there until it commences and shock us all."

Jaylin smiled and gave Thasos a sharp salute. "Hardly. I'm sure Jevin has something for me to do before then. So, until we cross swords again, my friend. I've noticed you're getting slower defending your right flank. You should practice more."

"It's the height of bad manners to insult your weapon master. Even with a strong bout of dysentery, I could still knock an Atabyrion highlander out of your hands. Remember that."

Jaylin opened the door of Kalisha's home and stepped out on the shaded porch. The sun was barely brightening the sky over the jagged line of rooftops visible as far as he could see. The darkness had yet to retreat. He glanced back at his friend who closed the door behind him and locked it with a spare key. "What else brings you down to the lower Tiers? Alvaron hasn't escaped from sanctuary has he?"

"But that's something I wouldn't be able to tell an Espion, would I?"

* * *

It was after midday when Jaylin joined the crowds on Runner's Bridge. The experience was similar to attempts to walk upstream in a surging river, but Jaylin was familiar with the crowds and the delay. He had nothing, really, worth stealing. Nothing a thief would be able to find anyway. Most of his coins were carefully tucked away in secret pockets. Daggers were illegal to carry, but his Espion ring authorized him to use any weapon he chose. He passed the legion sheriffs guarding the gatehouse and ignored them. As he crossed the thick bridge and glanced at the huge houses forming twin ridges on each side, he thought he heard the quiet rush of the Semn through the cracks. The bridge was tall and shuddered with the pounding boots and rattling carts. He recognized the lay of the bridge well, even seeing the alley he had ducked down to elude a well-laid trap set by his enemy, Lady Minya. From one inn's rooftop, he had jumped into the surging waters below. He shook his head, trying to fight down a grin. Thasos was right—he did love to brag about it.

But more than that, Jaylin loved the City of Minya, its spicy flavors and variety of people. Street vendors who screeched and persuaded, thieves always out to steal a loosely guarded bag of silver dyx, students and teachers and tradesmen and cooks. And wearing his pilgrim fare, he was part of it all. In the Tier of Premye, he was a Prince's spy. In the Tier of Median, he was himself, comfortable, relaxed, and inconspicuous. In the Tier of Minya, he was a leader, a man who challenged ideas and invented better ways of doing things. But in the Tier of Aster, he was quiet

and watchful, knowing that if the Nasturtium caught him, he could be executed for his trespass. Prince Jevin's Espion were not allowed within the holy walls of Aster unless they attended it as part of the entourage of the King's Will. At least, Jaylin thought, they weren't supposed to be allowed. But if a man like Dragan could enter and exit on a whim, surely there were other ways to avoid getting caught.

After reaching the far side of the huge bridge, Jaylin paused as the crowd formed. Most had silver pendants that showed them to be the Tier's residents. They also had to pass through two gates, one leading outside the King's jurisdiction, outside the sheriff's control. The inner gate belonged to Aster, controlled by the Deconeus. Within the calm walls of Aster, the King's Will did not rule. The Tier of Aster and its churches were the only places in Minya where it did not.

"I'm a pilgrim," Jaylin said sheepishly, shrugging as the sheriffs asked his business. They nodded easily and let him pass. Beyond, the line thinned out. Those who wore the silver medallion around their necks were allowed in without question. They had already sworn the sanctuary oath of Aster, were granted protection and safety within.

He approached the first of the sentinels. "Your name, sir?"

"Janis Berkoa," Jaylin replied with a penitent smile. "I'm on pilgrimage to the Temple."

"Ahhh," the Nasturtium replied warmly. "Is this your first time this year, Master Berkoa?"

"No, it's my second visit. I was humbled by the experience and desired to visit again." He kept his face controlled, his eyes mild.

"A two-day pass would be sufficient then."

"I would prefer staying longer, but if that is a problem..."

The Nasturtium nodded approvingly. "Your devotion is respected, my brother, but remember that the King's Will arrives shortly. There is much preparation to be done, and we need to keep the crowds down." He scrawled the name on the two-day pass. "There you are, Master Berkoa. Enjoy the Tier of Aster."

The Nasturtium searched him briefly for weapons, but then allowed him into the grounds without argument. No one had yet checked his wrists for sheathes. They always searched his belt and boot cuffs. Jaylin felt a prickly feeling in his stomach, knowing that he was taking his life in his hands, but he swallowed and walked steadily deeper. He'd only been to Aster once before. It was familiar, but the months had dimmed his memory. Finding Kalisha—or Alicia as she had named herself in Aster—or the blacksmith Gabe Finch would be difficult in only two days.

As a last resort, he knew he could visit the Temple grounds and find the renegade poet Jonas Skelton. But he wanted to avoid that kind of contact, especially so close to the Deconeus' personal domain. He trusted in his abilities. He had learned a great deal as a legion sheriff in Abyri and the Espion training he had received over the preceding months had trained him well in the methods of asking questions.

Jaylin approached a cloth merchant's stall. "Excuse me, I'm looking for the seamstress Alicia. Can you tell me where to find her shop? Is it nearby?"

The cloth merchant thought and then shrugged. "Alicia the seamstress? If she's here, I don't know about her. I know all the seamstresses in Aster, but no one by that name. Do you know what work she does?"

Jaylin shook his head, "No, I only know that she's a seamstress. I believe she set up a shop very recently."

"How do you know of her then?" the merchant inquired, his eyes showing distrust.

"I met her the last time I came here," Jaylin answered. "If you'd met Alicia, you wouldn't forget her. Long, blonde hair. Quite a beauty. To be honest," he added leaning closer and

dropping his voice, “I'm not really interested in her sewing. If you know what I mean.”

It was the perfect touch to dispel the man's doubt. Jaylin nearly grinned.

The merchant chuckled. “Well young man, at least you're honest.” He paused and rubbed his chin. “I'm starting to remember something, but I just can't reach it. Hmmm.” He looked at Jaylin expectantly.

Jaylin understood. “Ahh, well, you know I love the cloth samples you have here. How much could I buy for...say a silver dyx.”

“An Aster dyx or Minyan dyx?”

“Aster of course,” Jaylin said. They were worth a little more because of the tax on currency within the Tier, but he had saved his coins from the last visit.

“Oh, you could get a good bolt of fabric for a dyx, my friend. Which interests you?”

Jaylin glanced at the collection and fingered some rich blue velvet. “What about this?”

“That will make a nice robe collar,” the merchant said, smiling. He unfolded the length and snipped a dyx's worth. Jaylin handed him one of the Aster dyx coins he had traded in the last time he had visited the Tier.

“I don't know this Alicia woman you spoke of. But I do remember hearing Mazzle Freeh lament some upcoming competition. Mazzle's a good customer of mine, so I must of course make all my referrals to her. See what she knows.”

*Mazzle Freeh*, Jaylin thought. “How can I find her?”

“She's in a quiet part of the Tier, kind of away from the main traffic. It's a little tricky to find. Do you know where Stampgrate is?”

Jaylin shook his head.

“Amberbath?”

Again, he didn't know.

“You are fresh here, aren't you. Do you have any circles?”

Jaylin knew that answer. He'd been branded with a circle unjustly during his first week in the City of Minya. “One.”

“I thought so. Learned a lesson, I hope. Let's see...if you follow this road a little farther down, you'll find a main road going straight south towards the twin churches of Aster. But before you get to those churches, you'll see part of the old city wall. As soon as you see that, head towards it and follow that road. Start asking folks which sideroad Mazzle's shop is at, and you'll find it quick enough. Can I interest you in buying anything else? I have some wonderful tightweave, made in Atabyrion...”

“Atabyrion tightweave? Amazing. But I thank you for the velvet. Truly a quality piece of fabric. Is it really from Atabyrion? They make the best tightweave. May Aster be with you.”

With a little bow, Jaylin retreated and join the thronging street. He turned south at the largest street junction and could make out the twin citadel churches flanking the road. He stopped abruptly to dislodge a pretended stone from his boot, surreptitiously glancing to discern if he was being followed. It was an Espion tactic. And there were others he used as well. Occasionally, he loitered at a side alley.

As the day elapsed, he stopped at a street vendor and bought a small loaf of rye stuffed with chilies and spiced beef. It was savory, and he washed it down with a flask of mead. The throes of summer abated slowly as the seasons changed, and he wiped the sheen of sweat from his forehead. He was comfortable, feeling part of the commotion, not against it. So much of what made a man blend in was how comfortable he walked, as opposed to gawking at buildings. After brushing the crumbs from his tunic, he continued. He passed Nasturtium periodically, but kept

his gaze leveled at the churches.

Two bells later, he found the old stone wall that used to mark the boundary of the Tier of Aster, and he followed a side alley towards it. The crowds thinned, dripping dry after several blocks. A mile down the street, he paused by a tailor's shop called *Brancus' Buttons*.

"I'm looking for Mazzle Freeh," Jaylin said to the stout man, alone in a room full of wares.

He snorted. "Tell that harlot of a seamstress I'm not paying a blasted nail more for a vest sleeve! Get out!"

Jaylin wondered why his business seemed sparse. "I'd be happy to tell her, if you'd point the way."

"You don't want to shop here? What's wrong with my clothes? You're scrawny enough, I'm bound to have something ..." he burped lightly, "That'd fit you. Tunic or chausses?"

"Mazzle Freeh," Jaylin repeated. "Her shop?"

The man scowled and cursed. "Keep heading down. It's by the next tower turret, by the Veil. She runs a big place, you won't miss it, you nasty pale-skinned little scrap..." Jaylin shut the door, shaking his head.

Despite Brancus' demeanor, his directions proved to be correct. The old wall of Aster had three supporting towers with turrets, and the second one lay in the middle. The road widened abruptly and several roadways jutted away from it like wagon spokes. There were shops all over in that quiet part of town, with little bustle. At the corner of one of the spokes sat a shop with brightly painted letters.

Mazzle Freeh.

The circular pool and fountain hunkered in the middle of the courtyard, with an iron pump to draw up the water around a wide stone ditch, collecting the extra. Dogs lapped up the water, and sniffed at Jaylin with interest. A girl scrubbed laundry in the pool at the far end. It wasn't Kalisha, so he approached the shop and entered.

Mazzle Freeh was in her early forties, and she was about as wide as she was tall. The shop smelled of cotton and wool, and it contained rolls of fine-twined thread for purchase, along with all sizes of silver needles. Patterns and colors, cloaks and tassels, a huge display. Jaylin found two young girls sewing at a bench near the window. They were no older than thirteen, either of them. Dominating the counter, her elbows the size of hams, rested Mazzle Freeh. She was missing one tooth and eyed Jaylin warily.

"I could have new pants and a nice pair of gloves done for you in about four shakes." She eyed him scrupulously. "Maybe a hat too. Come closer young man."

Jaylin obeyed. "Mazzle Freeh?"

She eyed his face closely. "Nice stitch job on your cheek and jaw. Probably cost a lot. Doesn't bulge out, looks healed actually. Who did the work?"

"To be honest, I don't really remember. A friend of mine took me there in the Tier of Median. But you're right. It cost a lot. I was on the wrong end of a strong fist."

"With a face like yours, I think I understand. What can I help you with? I've got a bed in back, if you'd like more *private* conversation." Her eyebrows arched invitingly.

"I do need help, Mazzle. But not that kind." He gave her a charming grin. "Actually, I heard you may be able to help me. I'm looking for some competition of yours..."

"Alicia?" Mazzle asked the question lightly, but her voice revealed an angry jab. She smiled. "Hit the mark, didn't I?"

"You're good," Jaylin said. "You know of her then?"

Her smile flashed mischievously. "Oh yes, but lad, that's one door you don't want to knock

on. She's spoken for."

"Really?"

"You're good looking and all, lad, but trust me in this. Stay away from her. There are plenty of other girls who will warm a bed for a man like you."

"It's not what you're thinking," Jaylin said, holding up his hands. "She's a beauty, to be sure, but she knows someone I want to get in touch with."

Her face pinched. "You're a good liar, lad. But a liar still."

Jaylin stepped up to the counter, gave her a stern look. "Only my best friends know that." He winked at her.

She eyed him and then straightened her apron. "If you're so hot to see her, go ahead. You'll find her at Old Man Hill's, just down this street around the bend. It's not marked, but it's the one across from Finch's forge." Her eyes twinkled. "If you need a place to come lick your wounds after, drop by, lad, and tell me how it went. Though you would impress her more if you dressed like a prince which I will gladly help you do."

"Why did you tell me so easily? I hadn't even opened my purse for you yet."

Mazzle chuckled. "I'm not a harlot in any great heat for dyx, lad." She winked at him, following up the innuendo. "I just enjoy seeing the Demiurge thwarted."

"The what?"

"Don't you go to the Temple often enough? Or do you sleep through the service? What a terrible disciple of Aster you are! Remember the Creation? When the Demiurge formed the world to test his son, Micharix, he gave him the choice of two brides—Etayne, a woman of the flesh, one who would drag him from the Quintessence. The other was Biella, one of the daughters of Quitessence itself. Micharix chose Etayne, spurning the Demiurge's plans for his salvation. Etayne may have been only flesh, but she was what Micharix hungered for." She chuckled. "Old Man Hill's, across from the forge. Tell her I sent you." She cackled and slapped the counter. "Yes, tell her I sent her a customer!"

"I'm afraid your humor is too subtle for me, Mazzle. Has something happened to her in the last three months that I should be aware of, or are you just this protective of all love struck strangers?"

"Oh, I think you'll find out soon enough, lad. Soon enough. Besides, I'd hate to spoil a surprise."

Jaylin managed a warm smile, but barely. "I think I'll start going to heed the sermon more often now. For your help, I thank you."

"What's your name anyway, young master?"

"Janis Berkoa."

"Pretty," she answered. "You lie so well."

He left her shop and headed down the alley her shop was located on. He watched the road nervously, but it was deserted. Most of the buildings had one or more stories piled on top of them, with shops on the ground floor and living space above. The buildings were lopsided and run-down, but they looked comfortable. Dust kicked up from the cobblestones as he walked down the road.

At the bend, he saw a few crooked signs. The alley was abandoned, but it appeared to join another street farther down. Jaylin swallowed his anxiety and started down the rest of the way. On his left, he saw a sturdy sign that read *Master Finch's Forge*. Of all the houses on the street, it looked the quietest. The windows were all curtained from the inside.

Nervous anticipation was not a usual feeling for Jaylin. Mazzle's cryptic words unnerved

him. Across the dusty street, he saw a shop with a faded sign. *Old Man Hill's Cobbler Shop*. There was a large front window, but it was curtained. Jaylin approached and was about to knock, but a feeling of dread swelled inside him.

Kalisha had once been the lover of the Mark of Alvaron.

What if Jorganon was inside? What if Lady Minya was? He decided in that instant, he did not want to be trapped in the Tier of Aster by his enemies. Maybe Mazzle's reference to Etayne had invoked the feeling of doom. It was, after all, the name Lady Minya had given Jaylin to call her. Etayne was also part of the Atabyrion legends. Glancing around to make sure he was alone, his gaze rested on the front window. The curtain was closed, but there was a gap.

Jaylin wiped sweat from his brow. He stepped quietly off the porch and then peeked into the window. It was caked with a layer of dust, and he wiped his sleeve over it quickly. He saw her inside.

Kalisha sat in a high-backed chair, a drape of cloth on her lap and she was sewing it deftly. The fabric was a rich blue cloak, very large. Her long hair trailed down one shoulder and she looked intently at her work, then shifted with discomfort and leaned forward, massaging her back. After setting down the needlework, she rose from the chair and turned around. Jaylin saw the bulge from her abdomen the size of a small melon.

Without a doubt, Jaylin realized with astonishment, Lady Kalisha was pregnant. Quite pregnant. No wonder Mazzle was convinced that she was spoken for. The question that bloomed first to his mind was if she had conceived prior to leaving the Tier of Premye. And he had a good idea that the answer to that was yes.

He heard a noise. Then something struck the back of his head.

# Chapter Two

Old Man Hill's, Tier of Aster

It was, in fact, a shoe.

"Get away from my shop, you devil-some cabbage!" came a gravely voice from above.

An old man with oily gray-black hair and wrinkled skin leaned out the upstairs window. He hurled another shoe, but Jaylin managed to dodge it. "I'll not have you peeking in at her, you hear that? Get away, you scoundrel! Out! Out! Get away! Dirty coddling moth, peeking at her like that. Get out!"

Jaylin stood stunned for a moment, his head smarting, enduring a blistering tirade and nearly burst out laughing. The front door swung open.

"I said git!" Another shoe pelted down, and he sidestepped it as well.

"Jaylin!"

He found himself facing the King's beloved mistress. She had run away from Premye months before. It was the second time he had tracked her down, and he almost couldn't prevent a smug smile. She looked dazed, her green eyes a little bloodshot, her face pale.

"It's okay, Father!" she said to the man leaning out the window. "Come in, Jaylin. Come inside. Quickly! He has more shoes upstairs."

He obeyed, and she shut the door, leaning back against it, her throat flushed.

"Of all the days of solitude and quiet and you show up again," she whispered, sagging back against the door. "You come like a crow, yet risk your life a second time coming to the Tier of Aster. What news do you bring? Is Davin-Noll dead?"

She chewed her lip and there was a tremor in her hand he noticed. Sweat danced in the hollow of her throat, and she swallowed.

Jaylin glanced at the swell protruding from her gown. A new gown, very fashionable with its embroidered front and contrasting sleeves—revealing the condition of her pregnancy even more.

"Hardly. Congratulations on the new babe, Kalisha." Again, he felt the urge to laugh.

"Who's down there, lass? I'm going to fetch that blacksmith. Will teach him about snooping in windows! I'll..." He broke into a rasping cough that turned into choking.

"It's nothing!" she called up to him. "Be still, Father. I'll be all right." She looked at Jaylin, her eyes glittering with pent-up emotion. "Well, you do like surprises after all. Maybe I should have expected this. What are you doing here, Jaylin?"

He checked the room making sure they were alone, except for the angry old man upstairs laboring to breathe. "Are you expecting anyone?"

"Gabe checks on me during the day." She kneaded her lower back, wincing.

Jaylin rubbed his mouth, looking deeply at her. "You realize what will happen in Premye if that's Davin-Noll's child."

"Thank Aster it isn't his then." But she was lying, and he knew it. Her green eyes flashed with warning.

"You can claim Radamistus is the father, if you want. But I think the King of Minya is a more honest statement of the facts. Isn't it?"

Kalisha trembled. "Do you know what Radamistus would do if he knew you were here? He was very cross with Gabe when he returned from the King's Will. He doubted Gabe's loyalty for a

time. But he said if you were to come back, he wished to know of it at once."

"I guess that is the reason I must leave before Gabe returns. In fact, I doubt he'll be any more happy to see me than you are."

"Then why did you come? Why risk it?"

"You're not difficult to find, Kalisha. Not when I know who to look for. Who to ask about. I know enough to find you again, even if you left this Tier. Have no doubts about that. I'm here on a personal errand for the king."

She paled even more. "Dear Aster, no! I told you I wouldn't go back, even after Jorganon's fall. I won't go with you!"

"It's not that, Kalisha. Davin-Noll wants to see you. Just for a short time, to bid you farewell, or whatever. You know he is sick. He's grown worse since you left. The hacking cough, the trembles. Like the old man upstairs, only worse. But you did leave him after all. He misses you sorely. I promised him I would find you and ask if you would see him. Only a moment if that is all you can bear. What do you say? Will you show some compassion for your king? The meeting can be on your terms."

She chafed her hands. "I must speak with Gabe first."

Jaylin shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I don't have that much time. Nor the inclination to await the Deconeus' headsman today. The King's Will is coming to the Tier of Aster." He took a step closer. "It need only be for a few moments."

Her eyes looked stricken, welling with tears. "I cannot, Jaylin. Not like this. If he knew or believed I carried his seed, he'd drag me out of the Tier by force. Or worse, take the child! I will not let this babe be raised in the Tier of Premye. Never!"

Disappointment stung him, but not surprise. "So you will not meet with him?"

She shook her head. "Jaylin, you cannot tell him what you've found. That could ruin everything for me. Even here in Aster, I heard what you did at the last King's Will. You broke Jorganon with my letter. But if you tell him about me now, you'll break me, break my child." She shuddered. "Leave it be, Jaylin. Leave it be."

"I understand your fear, Kalisha. I've seen for myself the wasps and spiders that live in Premye. But I also see my Sovereign. Davin-Noll has been miserable since you left, and he doesn't have much time left." He sighed, but realized he'd not be able to persuade her. "Contact me at the King's Will if you change your mind. Gabe will be able to find me. I can promise you that the meeting will be discreet. Is there anything else you would like me to tell the King when I return? Other than you are carrying his child?"

The look she returned gave him a pang of regret.

"You could hardly expect me to keep such news a secret, Kalisha. Now, I will promise to keep faith and not reveal where you live, but...Kalisha don't!"

Jaylin watched her jerk a silver whistle from her bodice and blow it with a loud ear-splitting squeal. The noise carried through the house and far beyond. She blew it again and again, her eyes wild with fear. The blue sapphire ring he had given her months before flashed on her finger.

Jaylin rushed and parted the curtain, looking at the door to Gabe's forge. No one had emerged yet. Though she was still blocking the door, he grabbed her arm and wrist and shunted her aside - gently. After opening the door, he paused, though his heart raced like warhorses. He felt the pulse in her wrist throbbing. "Kalisha, one day you must learn that you cannot run from consequences. You, like everyone else, have to live with them."

Her face was sharp, accusing. "Well said, Jaylin. Only I have to live with the consequences

of your actions too!"

The old man came hollering and charging down the stairs, and several loose shoes tumbled down ahead of him.

Jaylin gave her a rakish smile. "That ring suits you," he said, tilting her to her hand. "The offer that went with it still stands. I will do everything in my power to safeguard the life you've chosen, Kalisha. But you cannot hide forever, and I can only do so much."

"I'll not have this child raised in Premye. Gabe knows that. Don't make an enemy of him. Not even an Espion ring would save you."

He let her go and started out the door.

She blew the whistle again.

With the shrill noise grating down his back, Jaylin walked briskly down the alley, continually glancing over his shoulder for signs of pursuit. He itched to run, but knew that would cause him to stand out unnecessarily. His body was sweating, but he kept his stride even paced, long but not exaggerated. He passed Mazzle Freeh's shop and joined the thin crowds in the Old Wall sector of Aster. He sighed with relief and then took another alley to shake off any pursuers.

He headed directly back for Runner's Bridge.

If he knew Gabe well enough, he suspected the blacksmith would try and head him off. But with a direct head start, Jaylin suspected he had plenty of time to leave the Tier before they would be watching the gates for him to leave. Jaylin wanted to be out of the Tier of Aster before Curfew sounded in Median.

Keeping a punishing pace made his legs weary and his side cramp up. Vivid memories came to him of his flight across Runner's Bridge and his suicidal jump into the Semn. He did not remember hearing any hammering noises from Gabe's forge. If he were at the Temple, then Jaylin's lead would definitely be enough. He glanced from the corner of his eyes, alert for any indication that he was being followed or to apprise himself of any Nasturtium nearby. He found the main road and the twin church citadels that marked the pathway to the Temple. He followed it north, away from the Isle of Aster, cursing his speed as he watched the sky darken.

The sun sank below the roofline, and shadows crowded on the main road. Hunger pangs assailed him, but he didn't dare stop and eat. He struggled against the flow of the crowds, who seemed to be returning from journeys in other Tiers. Many in the streets wore the black robes of the Nasturtium, but he kept away from them.

Jaylin approached the gates leading to Runner's Bridge and sighed of relief when he saw it was still open. The traffic bulged for folks coming back into the Tier, but there was a short line for people leaving. Knuckling his forehead, he entered the line.

With the sky a bright orange color under the faded sun, Jaylin approached the Nasturtium sentinel and smiled warmly when it was his turn.

"I trust your stay in Aster was pleasant," the Nasturtium said. "May I see your pass?"

Jaylin handed it back. The Nasturtium glanced at it and was about to put it down in an iron box, when he paused and looked at it again. His eyebrows lifted. "Master Berkoa, this pilgrims pass was issued today, this morning, from this very gate. Why are you leaving so early?"

*By the Veil*, he wanted to curse. He had not thought about that. But Espion training had taught him to lie, to control his expressions.

Jaylin bowed his head humbly. "I went straight to the Temple when I arrived this morning and spent some time in meditation and prayer. Then I got this feeling...a feeling that I should get back home as soon as possible." He swallowed, pausing for breath. "Normally, I would not worry since I live alone, but a dear friend of mine visited me recently and I fear something may

be wrong. I...I shouldn't have left him in the first place, but it had been too long since I was able to come here so I risked it. I may have been wrong. But praise to Aster for guiding me back! If I hurry, perhaps everything will be fine." Jaylin offered an appropriately devout expression.

The Nasturtium, however, did not appear entirely convinced. "Aster has blessed you indeed," he said, his eyes cutting. "With great speed. Why, it takes most pilgrims nearly a whole day to reach the Temple. I've yet to meet the man who can go there, pay his devotion, and be back in one." He frowned and withdrew an oblong stone, smooth and granular, the color of vivid moss. "Please hold out your hand and tell me again what you have done since arriving this morning?"

Jaylin stood about a dozen paces from the gate to Runner's Bridge. A crowd had formed on the other side as the legion sheriffs searched those on their way back in to the Tier of Aster. They controlled the bridge gate, but the Nasturtium controlled the inner gate of Aster.

Jaylin shrugged and extended his palm, annoying that the sweat stinging his eyes. The Nasturtium put the stone down on his hand. The color quickly shifted from bright green to a honey brown color.

"Now, if you would repeat your inspiring story. I would so care to hear it again."

Jaylin wore a casual expression, though a sheepish one. "Actually, I stopped to visit...a woman I had met while here last." He sighed. "Sadly, she didn't appreciate my visit very much and sent for a friend of hers. A big friend. I had thought our last meeting went rather well, but I didn't want to make any trouble. Especially here in holy Aster, so I left." Jaylin shrugged apologetically. "It's true that I didn't have the chance to visit the Temple. But it is also true that I need to get back before Curfew rings. I'd hate to get in trouble with the legion sheriffs." He nodded towards the sheriffs close by. "May Aster forgive me for putting my own affairs before his. I'm sure I will be chastised for this sin." He hung his head low.

The Nasturtium regarded him coolly, watching as the color of the stone remained a neutral brown color.

"I understand your shame, my brother," the Nasturtium said, "But you should never try to deceive us." He took the stone back and dropped it in a pocket. "However, you must face your chastisement now. You were caught lying at an exit point. If your story checks out, we will let you go at dawn, where you will not be bothered by the sheriffs. If your story does not, you will face charges at the Temple. Come with me."

"What I told you is true," Jaylin said.

The Nasturtium smiled. "You were given a two-day pass, my brother. Surely you can wait until tomorrow? Under Aster's protection, you have no need to fear." He motioned for another Nasturtium to come and take his place.

It didn't appear to Jaylin that they suspected him of anything greater than deceit; however, if more time passed, a warning from Gabe would reach the gates for certain. He had to leave the Tier before then.

"Very well," Jaylin said with a sigh, shrugging and holding up his hands, "Where must we go? I am rather hungry. Will there be soup and wafers?"

The Nasturtium smiled ominously and directed Jaylin deeper into the Tier, back the way he had come.

"Ah, that way then? Very well."

Jaylin grinned and then his hand shot out, an open palm blow to the side of the priest's face. Without a pause, Jaylin dropped and kicked the man's legs up and shoved him onto the cobbles.

"Stop! In the name of Aster, stop!" The other Nasturtium shrieked at him, reaching for his saber. Jaylin shoved past him and bolted for the open gate to Runner's Bridge. Another Nasturtium sentry suddenly stood before him, coming out of a side alcove. He had a saber in his hand and swung it in a throat-level arc.

Jaylin ducked the blow, using another Tah-path maneuver to grip the man's wrist, wrench it, and strike up at his chin. Weaving away from the howling Nasturtium, he shoved past some ordinary men, bakers or butchers or some sort. Others closed in behind him, so he stopped suddenly and whirled around, his foot extending. He tripped another priest. The man's face contorted with pain as he struck the cobbles. Jaylin jumped up again, spinning around and landing another blow. The Nasturtium fell, his blade clattering on the stone.

Jaylin ran towards the gate to Runner's Bridge. He smiled with victory when a wash of cold came over him. His muscles and limbs suddenly stiffened, and he felt as if a heavy wall of stones sank on his wrists and ankles. He staggered and then stopped, his foot touching Runner's Bridge. He struggled to move, but his arms and legs were no longer his.

"Did you see him! He struck a priest! He's fighting them!"

"Someone's trying to escape the Tier of Aster!"

"Look, the Nasturtium are down! By the Veil!"

Jaylin watched the legion sheriff sentries taking in the scene. The Nasturtium came and grabbed Jaylin, began dragging him back to the Aster side. Though Jaylin's limbs were frozen, his mouth wasn't.

"I serve the King's Will! These men are violating your jurisdiction! Help me!"

Jaylin cast a silent prayer to Aster, begging it would work. Though the irony of it did make him nearly burst out laughing again. Praying to Aster so that the god's priests wouldn't take him? He might as well pray to avoid the silver tithe.

"That's right!" the sheriff captain shouted. "He was on *our* side of the bridge, wasn't he?" He blew his alarm whistle. "Black robes! Let him go. I said, let him go! Norrus and Kolby. Danner and Frih. Come on, lads." His men charged the Nasturtium holding Jaylin. Watching their truncheons fly free of the belt hoops, Jaylin nearly whooped with joy. Before, the black uniform of the legion sheriffs had reminded him of home and of a few unsavory servants of the Steene he had met since coming to Minya. But he had almost forgotten the enmity that the sheriffs and the Nasturtium felt for each other.

One of the sheriffs clubbed the Nasturtium holding Jaylin and the paralysis left. He broke free of the other priest, kicking him the stomach. "Bring them to our side of the bridge! How many sheriffs have *they* tortured?"

"Who are you?" one of the sheriff asked him, his ruddy face alive with sharp whiskers. "Oh, look at that! They've got two more! Oogh, he'll have a nasty bruise on that eye!"

A melee had broken out on the bridge. Legion sheriffs and Nasturtium engaged each other with truncheons and sabers, while the crowd surged both in and away from the Tier. Jaylin counted three captured Nasturtium, but deeper into the Tier he saw flank after flank of the black robed priests running towards the gate.

"Bar the gates!" the sheriff captain ordered. "Access is denied everyone!" He growled and beat back those trying to gain the refuge of the sanctuary. "Bar the gates!"

At his command, the portcullis let out a grinding squeal and started swiftly down.

"Clear the way! Clear the way!"

The legion sheriffs hastened to retreat, dragging their captives with them. The portcullis groaned and came down shut like wolf jaws. One man barely jumped clear in time and was

nearly split in two by the massive steel and oak grate.

"Bolt it down! Shut the gate doors! Move, get them closed!"

There was a surge of bodies, and people began running off in panic. Additional sheriffs arrived, demanding to know what happened. Jaylin watched it all with a little throb of satisfaction. The sheriffs had been starving for conflict with the Nasturtium and he had kindled it. Staring at the walls of Aster, he swore in his heart that the day would come when the Espion would be granted free access to every Tier. When the ring he had earned the right to wear, the Espion ring, would be deferred to by Nasturtium and sheriffs both.

Jaylin approached the portcullis gate as the two massive doors heaved against the rusty hinges. He watched a new group of Nasturtium arrive, snarling with fury and breathing oaths.

Jaylin bowed to them with a flourish before the doors closed. "Tell Radamistus that as much as I enjoyed my stay in the Tier of Aster today, it was time to depart. Tell him Jaylin Warnock sent you." He grinned as the twin doors thudded shut, and huge chains were drawn over the locking bar.

"Jaylin Warnock," the sheriff captain said in the kind of voice he obviously reserved for cursing. But his eyes were aglow. "Why is it that every time you come to Runner's Bridge, men start to bleed?"

"Because, friend," Jaylin said with a cocky grin, "I would hate for things to get boring. Give my regards to Carshalton. Tell him I still owe him a favor."

"Aye, a great number of men owe him favors. He's a good sort, he is. Though he's too honest." The sheriff laughed and shook his head. "You don't know how long those churlish Nasturtium have been provoking us." His face spasmed with anger. "It was good to get back at them. Now, what happened? Aren't you Espion? I thought they only allow Espion in there during open session of the King's Will."

Jaylin bent over and withdrew his Espion ring from the secret pouch in his boot. He glided it on his finger and showed it to the captain, twisting the stone to make the stone change colors.

"Now listen, captain, this is the report you need to give. One of these Nasturtium back there had a pass for a Janis Berkoa. That's me," he said with a wink. "He denied me access back to Median, and you know the rest. They violated jurisdiction, not you."

"Of course they did!" he said and huffed. "Those craven black skirts are always saying we do, but it's gull squap and they know it. We caught them at it this time. So, what do you want us to do with the ones we caught?"

"Do what you please. The Espion won't interfere, whatever you choose. I would suggest though, that you make them worry about their fate. Make them sweat a little." He winked. "It'll add spice to the King's Will coming up."

"Aye, Espion. That is true. I'm telling you, we need to take back the Tier of Aster. Radamistus has grown too powerful in there. These Nasturtium bigots. Well, might as well ask a gutter bitch not to pee on a post then, right?"

Jaylin laughed. "What's your name?"

"Captain Markome." He smiled, and the young Atabyrion noticed he was missing a tooth.

"You have my thanks for a daring rescue." He offered the man a firm Minyan salute. "Make sure you take good care of those Nasturtium. I wouldn't want them getting homesick."

The captain laughed as Jaylin abandoned the gatehouse and hurried across Runner's Bridge, still barely believing he had made it out at all.

* * *

It was a crisp early autumn night. The wind came in sharp swirls, drawing a little shudder from Jaylin as he nudged the courier stallion up to the Premyen Walls. He skirted the main gates that were closed to all but the King's errands. After reaching the eastern gate, Jaylin dismounted and showed the sentry his Espion ring.

The guard looked tired and gazed at Jaylin with bleary eyes. “It's late, sir. Welcome to Premye.”

Jaylin nodded and waited for the sentry to unlock the side gate. “Take care of the horse,” Jaylin said. “I may need it later.”

The sentry nodded and Jaylin passed through the gate. He crossed the dark forested park on the other side of the wall, heading towards the lone beacon of the church's light beyond. He skirted the church, angling his way towards the rise of Premye's first plateau. At the base of the plateau, he paused before a huge drainage shaft. He paused, listened, and then entered. Tripping the secret latch, he entered the Espion tunnel that wound it's way up to Jevin's estate.

The night was nearly over by the time Jaylin reached the City Room. Its name was derived because it was the hub of Jevin's Espion operation in the Tier of Premye. Tunnels webbed beneath the entire Tier, but the City Room was the master key of it all. A full replica of the City of Minya had been constructed. Maps of the city, both old and new, were available, as well as couches and food and enough mead to quench any thirst. The Espion were all equals in that chamber, the Prince of Minya included.

A lamp thick with oil cast a subdued glow over the City Room as Jaylin entered. It was empty, save for the numerous couches and serving table. Jaylin poured himself a cup of mead and sat down with some wafers and fruit. He finished both and brushed the crumbs onto the carpeted floor. Stretching out on a stuffed couch, he fell asleep.

When he awoke, he found Prince Jevin sitting in a nearby chair, his goatee curved up in a smile mingled with curiosity. The prince had a warm look, faintly amused, and he shook his head. His brown-green eyes probed. “Tell me that was you on Runner's Bridge last night at sunset.”

Jaylin lurched to his feet, filled his cup with more mead, and swallowed it down before replying. “Does that sound like something I would do, Jevin?”

The gold flecks in Jevin’s hair stood out in the lamplight. “It has all the fixings of a minor skirmish with dead Nasturtium…I won't even guess how many. I know you intended to go into the Tier of Aster, but you sure left it in an uproar. I wanted to be here to thank you personally.”

“For a moment, I thought you were going to say Radamistus excommunicated you. Why the approval?”

“Because that's just the kind of controversy I can throw in Radamistus' face at the next King's Will. Which, after all, will be held in that Tier. It's perfect. I'll wager the Deconeus thinks I asked you to do it deliberately. Since I didn't, I can deny it without lying!”

“Is Radamistus having a snit about it?” He loved that he could banter with Jevin—speak to him as an equal. The prince had impressed him from the day they had first met.

“A snit? I believe we could call it such. It galls him to no end that an Espion made it in and out of Aster. Twice. But when you pulled the legion sheriffs into it too.” He shook his head ruefully. “That's like adding adders and asps together.”

Jaylin shrugged. “Well, he deserves it for granting Jorganon sanctuary and then *claiming* he escaped. If he's willing to hide our criminals, then I'll be cursed by Aster before I let him keep me or any Espion from the Tier. After all, don't we deserve to pay our devotions too?”

"Most assuredly, we do. Very pious of you, Jaylin. I would not want to keep a man from his conscience." He rose and started pacing. "I've been trying to wrest his death grip from that Tier since I was old enough to pray. It's the only Tier in Minya where the King's Will doesn't mete out justice. I don't care why it was done, or which kings sanctioned it." He shook his head and scowled. "It's not right."

"Then the King's Will should be rather interesting this time around."

"Oh, yes. I really think we've made some progress, and Jorganon's disappearance bolsters our argument. Your little show of force on Runner's Bridge will also help our case. Good work, Jaylin. You continue to impress me."

Jaylin bit into some wrepfruit and then took another sip from his cup. He had held onto the secret long enough. "Jevin, there has been something that has interested me since I came to Minya. Tell me about the succession to the Throne. Who is expected among the King's children to rule?"

"Ahh, the workings of the Throne. I wondered when you would start asking. Succession in Minya is not a perfect system. But it has a deep history. One must be a noble of the sword, that is the only real requirement."

"The law says that?"

Jevin nodded. "Yes, but as with most laws, it is much more entangling than that. The Mark of Asilomar, for instance, could claim the throne right now. But does he have enough support to bid for it? To fight for it? He doesn't. The Sovereigns of Minya must be popular, Jaylin, or they will be overthrown by their peers. Naturally, Davin-Noll will want his only son, Illion, to rule in his stead."

"But his daughters could rule? How many does he have?"

"Three daughters as well as Prince Illion. Princess Keyana—named after her mother—is the oldest. She's eighteen. Princess Sesilly is sixteen. Prince Illion is twelve and Princess Bredgit is nine. The Queen and my brother started having children immediately after their marriage. They had another son, but he died in the cradle. They've also had two other girls, but they also died young. Illion is young...almost *too* young."

"What do you mean?" Jaylin set the goblet down and folded his arms.

"He's the Mark of Torix and Tousann by title, but truly the Queen exercises control over the wardship of Torix. I control the wardship of Tousann. If Davin-Noll names Illion as his successor, someone will need to be the lad's Guardian. That will be critical to a peaceful succession."

"Has Davin-Noll chosen you?"

"Yes. He did ask me to be Guardian and safeguard Illion's throne. Only three powers in Minya would dare challenge my authority and he knows it. Queen Keyana would...and will. I'm already expecting that. Jorganon would have, but he is no longer a threat—thanks to you. Radamistus probably will also." Jevin shook his head, his expression thoughtful. "If he does, I will crush him and see that a new Deconeus serves in his place. Lady Minya won't like it any, but then again, her vote doesn't count these days. No, my greatest worry is that the Queen will try to stop me. But I believe I have stronger allies than her that will help the boy assume the Throne without her influence. Why the sudden interest in the succession?"

"I have some rather interesting news. But I hesitate to tell you."

"What is it?"

"It is more controversial than the incident at Runner's Bridge. If the news gets out, it would cause tumult at the next King's Will. More so than Alvaron's fall, I'm guessing."

Jevin's gaze narrowed, his eyes intense. “What is it? Rebellion?”

“No. But if I tell you, will you make me a promise? Outside of Guyaume Reim, no one else must hear this news until all three of us agree on how to release it. It's that important, Jevin. I promised to safeguard the news as best I can.”

Jevin's expression grew even more deadly serious. “You have my word.”

Jaylin raised his eyebrow. “I'm going to torture you a little, Jevin. Send for Guyaume. He needs to hear this also, and I would hate to deprive him the honor of being one of the first.”

Jevin hesitated, then nodded curtly and went to the door. He whispered to an errand outside to fetch his uncle. Jevin returned to his chair while Jaylin grabbed some stuffed spice rolls and a fresh cup of mead. His stomach churned as he wondered how they would receive the news. He had suspicions how Davin-Noll would take it. As he drank, he studied the Prince. Jevin kept strict control of himself at all times, but Jaylin could see his mind pondering the mystery. He was a sharp man. One of the smartest in the kingdom. Guyaume, thankfully, arrived shortly.

“Jevin, have you heard about Runner's Bridge...yet...” His voice trailed off when he saw Jaylin leaning against the arm of the couch. “I gather that's a *yes*. Good morning, Jaylin.”

“Come in, Uncle,” Jevin said, motioning for Guyaume to enter. “Jaylin has news for us. From Kalisha.”

“Aahhh,” the Espion sighed, shutting the door. He came over to a chair and lowered himself into it slowly. “What has happened to the lass since she left us?”

Jevin rubbed his hands together, his expression calm and studied. “Jaylin insists that we three be the only ones to know this information. That we decide together the best use of it.”

“We, the masters of the Espion, must swear to secrecy? Oh well, I suppose he deserves that dubious honor. If the message is important.”

“Come now, Guyaume,” Jaylin said, pretending to be offended. “You don't think I would have fought my way out of Aster, crossed three Tiers in the middle of the night just to announce our lady Kalisha had the sniffles?”

Guyaume smiled wryly. “You just might...”

“We're waiting,” Jevin said, a little impatiently. “You baited the hook, now let us snap at it.”

Jaylin took another long drink from his mead cup. Just to annoy them. He sighed dramatically and then set the cup down. “I've just returned from the Tier of Aster. A brief, but significant visit. As you know, the King asked me to arrange a meeting with his lost love. I don't think that will happen. I do not think she would want that. But Jevin, Guyaume—you will not believe our good luck. Or bad luck, depending on how you look at it.” He clapped his knees. “Kalisha is with child.”

For a moment, stunned silence.

“Sweet Aster!” Guyaume sighed, glancing quickly at Jevin before turning back to Jaylin. His forehead wrinkled and he scratched his throat. “You are serious?”

The Prince's eyes never faltered, but Jaylin saw he lost a little color. He nodded, almost imperceptibly. “Pregnant, you say?”

“And yes, the babe is Davin-Noll's,” Jaylin said.

“I'll be blasted,” Guyaume said, chuckling. “I'll be blasted to the Veil and beyond, Jevin, you were right!”

“Hush, Uncle,” Jevin said, holding up his hand.

“You knew?” Jaylin asked, his eyes widening.

“I had my suspicions. Only needed them confirmed. Uncle and I spoke about this months

ago as a possible reason she fled Premye. Oh, how this changes things!"

"Judging by what you told me," Jaylin said, "if word gets out right now, Kalisha's life would be in danger. This might have a powerful effect on the succession of the Throne. But I don't need to tell either of you that."

Guyaume adjusted his seat on the cushions. "If Davin-Noll were to announce Kalisha's child as his heir...and that's just the sort of sentimental thing he's capable of...the Queen would murder them, her and the child." The Espion master sighed. "Which is why she truly left. That is also why she was willing to persecute the Mark of Alvaron. She wanted no doubt as to the child's father."

"If Jorganon knew of this," Jevin said, "he would press it to his advantage. Guyaume, any word as to his whereabouts?"

"There are only two places he could be," Guyaume said flatly. "Either he's hiding in the Tier of Aster, with Radamistus' blessing or not, or he's with the Infidels in their Tier."

Jevin looked at Jaylin, his eyes a cloudy mix of green and hazel. "I believe he's in the Tier of the Infidel. It's part of another assignment I have for you, Jaylin."

"What assignment?"

"What do you know of the Gypsy Wars?"

"Only what I heard in Atabyrion. They were...what, three, four years ago? I heard it was rather bloody. But wars tend to be that way, I think."

"Yes, they ended three years ago and it was a bloody mess. Let me share with you a little slice of Minyan history. A baker in the lower Tiers would not know of this. Only those of us who have read the histories have seen the earlier texts. The first Minyans came to this peninsula eight centuries ago. There were a people already here, the Men of Torix, as they were called. They were on the west bank of the Semn, lived in the mountains. Raised sheep down in the valley where Aster and Lunis are. Our grandfathers claimed the east bank, where Median and Premye are. The Steene was the first fortress they built, a defensive position to protect the settlers. Over time, as Minya prospered, the Men of Torix engaged us in war, fought over trade, over land. The match was kept nearly equal, but our population grew faster than theirs. And their leaders kept bickering amongst themselves."

"Like the Atabyrions did," Jaylin said bemusingly. "Which helped Minya overtake our country too. Though we capitulated with treaties, not by war."

"Even so. The Men of Torix were conquered and re-conquered." A smile quirked on his mouth. "They did not seem to take to the lessons we were teaching. Eventually, their blood became mixed with ours. We began calling their remnants, those who clung to their old beliefs, who refused to acknowledge Aster, the Gypsy kings. Since the peninsula was first settled, there have been conflicts with them. The rebellion I put down three years ago was just another in a long line of rebellions. We subjugate them, and then they fester, heal, and defy us anew."

"Are you saying, Jevin, that the Gypsies are going to revolt again?"

Jevin held up his hand. "I took measures to prevent that. The wars with them are costly, sap our resources and demoralize our soldiers. The Gypsies do not fight as Minyans do. They are a night people and worship heathen gods in midnight rituals. It was difficult and costly defeating them, Jaylin. There was no gain, no profit. Only blood and death. I'd rather not have to do it again."

"You said you'd taken measures to prevent that."

The Prince nodded. "There are typically several Gypsy kings, Jaylin. They rule jointly, though the strongest willed one usually leads them. I defeated them by making an alliance with

one of the weaker kings. The other Gyspy kings I killed after their fall. There is only one left. The Gypsies won't rally around another, not while that one king still lives."

"Where is this last Gypsy king hiding?"

Guyaume smiled, scraping his gloved finger against the cushion fringe. He always wore expensive gloves. "Here in the Tier of Premye with his only child."

"A daughter," Jevin said.

"A daughter," Jaylin repeated. "Jevin, you've been keeping things from me. Why haven't I seen them around your manor? How many months have I visited here?"

"Oh no, I've given the Gypsy king his own manor. My manor at Rad-Nym. I keep him under guard, but Vorelann Torix is a crafty man, and I imagine he has his own spy network and communications going by now. He's quite an amiable fellow, but don't let his surface calm lull you. I'm sure he would kill me in an instant if he thought he could get away with it. Do you know where Rad-Nym is?

"Yes. That manor is familiar to me. East of here, along the plateau."

"That is right. It's a pretty cage, but a cage still."

"What about his daughter? What about her?"

"Atayika Torix. Talking to her is comparable to getting stung on the tongue by a bee. She's hateful of her confinement, doesn't care who knows it. Vorelann has more tact though."

"Where do the Gypsies live now? Did they retreat into the mountains after they lost?"

"Some did, but most dwell in the Tier of the Infidel. It used to be called the Tier of Kyra, until they murdered one of the previous Minyan kings. Since then, they've been an outcast people. They will not leave the peninsula, and they do not want to obey Minyan law. I've had my suspicions, Jaylin, that Vorelann is planning another rebellion."

"You're afraid that Jorganon is seeking to join him. Does this mean I get to visit the Tier of the Infidel?"

"I would never send an Espion down there to snoop around who wasn't Gypsy born. Believe me, just having your color hair would make you stand out down there. Some Gypsies would kill you for that. The legion sheriffs have total control, though I have a garrison down in Triple Junction. No, what I want you to do, Jaylin, is find out what Vorelann is planning. He's like you in that he's very good at making friends. I want you to become his friend, find out what he is planning. Does he receive any secret messengers? He's been circumspect, Jaylin, but I don't trust him. Neither should you."

It was an assignment that sounded more than interesting. "When can I meet him?"

"Tonight, if you wish. There will be a ball at Shallic Palace this evening. Some nonsense from my nieces, probably. I will extend the invitation to the Torixes, if you wish. You'll need some better clothes, of course. I'll have Kobus arrange something for you."

"I would like that. On a different subject, I remembered the other day that I never asked you something. You've had me training so rigorously, I've barely seen you since the last King's Will."

"What is it?"

"Where is Merohwey?"

Jevin frowned and glanced over at Guyaume. "Where did you hear that name, Jaylin?"

"Months ago, I overheard Lady Minya tell Jorganon that they would meet there." He shrugged. "I forgot to tell you about it at the time. Something about her cutting my face open with a dagger made me forget it until recently." He traced his finger along the line of the scar running down the side of his face. "Do you know where it is? What it is?"

"Uncle?" Jevin offered.

Guyaume sat forward, resting his arms on his knees. "To our best understanding, Merohwey is Lady Minya's stronghold. Her place of refuge. We do not know where in the city walls it is, or even if it is in the city walls. I've only heard it spoken of once before."

"When was that?"

Guyaume's smile was like ice. "It was the secret residence of the previous head of the Espion."

# Chapter Three

Shallic Palace
Tier of Premye

Following every session of the King's Will, the Sovereign of Minya hosted a ball of reconciliation. After a week laden with bickering, intrigue, and confrontation, the nobles of Minya enjoyed a brief, though mostly feigned, respite from their troubles. Jaylin had missed his first royal ball because of the bandages and stitches on his face.

He had no intention of missing another if he could help it.

"You look far more excited than you ought," Thasos said with a voice dripping sarcasm as they entered the corridor leading to the ballroom through the Queen's Wing of Shallic Palace. "I heard the Markess of Croy promise two thousand dyx to find you tonight."

"I'm hardly worth fifteen hundred, and she knows it," Jaylin said, glancing over at his friend and his elegantly attired uniform. "If I can make it through the entire evening avoiding her, I'd gladly *pay* two thousand dyx. I want you to watch my back, to keep that hawk from..."

"Pinching your arse?" Thasos suggested. "They say if she gets you alone in a window seat, you're not likely to come out without an obvious grin."

"You're terrible, Thasos. Truly. No, I'd appreciate it kindly if you'd keep her talons at bay. You can make yourself useful and introduce me to Keyana."

"The Queen? She hates you, lad. Trust me."

"No, her daughter. I can't believe you've been sheltering her from me for so long."

"If you dance with her tonight, you will know why I have. Now remember, the lass is promised to the Mark of Morvenn. Don't do anything reckless…as difficult as that may be for you. Here we are, come in."

As they entered the main aisle, Jaylin could hear the trill of pipes, the thunder of drums, and the soft strain of vellobas. Jevin's steward Kobus had arranged for a snappy new tunic for Jaylin, a fashionable green, not gaudy, but with gemstones and expressive stitchery. He did not wear Jevin's tunic or badge, deciding to mingle freely without the Prince's banner waving over his head. The scars on his face were telling enough. Thasos was garbed in a combed wool tunic, clearly displaying his rank and position as captain of the Queen's Guard. His goatee was trimmed and he smelled well oiled. He wore ceremonial gloves and had a jeweled dagger in his belt. Thankfully, he had left his Atabyrion highlander in its scabbard somewhere else.

They entered the ballroom of Shallic Palace from one of the side alcoves, giving Jaylin an opportunity to observe in the shadows before making an entrance. The ballroom was domed and had six chandeliers, each blazing with a hundred lamps. The dome rose nearly fifty spans with open windows in recesses above to allow the heat to escape. Seven other alcoves connected to the ballroom, providing access and exit points. The floor was crowded with the frills and glitter of the King's court. Servants with lace and silk shirts droned through the hall like buzzing bees, dispatching food and refreshment.

"There's your princess," Thasos said in a low voice, motioning discreetly to the throne dais.

Jaylin peered over the crowds and caught a glimpse of her. She was dark-haired, like her father, but had the tell-tale streaks of gold like Jevin. She was short, but filled the fiery crimson gown well. Her dark tresses were pinned back under a simple jeweled coronet. She took away a goblet from her father as the King doubled over in a cough.

"Princess Keyana," Jaylin said. "She'll be easy enough to spot later with that blazing gown. The design and cut look familiar to me. Maybe I have seen her before."

"You know the seamstress, Jaylin."

"Ah, that must be it. She's a beauty, truly."

"She's also a flirt. And a marriage prize half the Marks of Minya crave for their sons." He covered a grin. "Don't deny it, I know what you're thinking."

"What?" Jaylin asked in exaggerated defiance. "You don't think I want to marry her, do you?"

"You would need a few more drops of noble blood in your veins for that, lad. Besides, she's promised to the Mark of Morvenn. I told you that. I'm just warning you because you have a tendency to crave forbidden fruit."

"You think a warning from you is going to change that? My friend, you don't know me nearly as well as you think. Now where is Torix? Do you see him or his daughter? I would probably have better luck with her."

Thasos laughed out loud, then surveyed the crowds. "Ahh, there by the screen by the other alcove. He's the tall one..."

"He is tall," Jaylin said, impressed. "Are all gypsies that dark-skinned?"

"They are. I am not one to slur their dark skin either. I fought against Vorelann Torix during the Gypsy Wars. The lot of them have hair as black as pitch and skin like the earth. Oh, his girl came too." Thasos paused. "That surprises me. Hmm, she's growing up quickly."

Jaylin caught a blur of midnight hair, but she was half-concealed by her father's stature. She was medium height, slender, and dark skinned. Fathers and daughters, Jaylin thought amusingly, glancing from Davin-Noll to Vorelann Torix. So many kings, which to accost first...?

"Keep a mead cup handy for me," Jaylin said with a wink, heading directly towards the King's dais. He observed as he approached that there was open space between the dancers and the dais. Drawing nearer, he saw several of the King's guardsmen posted as perimeter sentries around him to prevent guests from approaching him.

As Jaylin advanced, the King's steward intercepted him. "Do you wish to speak with the King, Master Warnock?" he asked as if he didn't know, his blue eyes like daggers. Jaylin didn't really care for Gislebertus.

"If you must know," Jaylin said in a conspiratorial tone, "I was planning to seduce the King's daughter." After pausing for the look of shock that soon split the steward's face, he grinned and clapped him on the back. "Yes, I have a message for the King. One he will want to hear."

"You are an unmannered wretch," Gislebertus seethed in a low voice.

"Coming from you, I'll take that as a compliment." Jaylin nodded and then walked past the sentries. Gislebertus strode quickly ahead of him, giving the Sovereign of Minya a quick warning that he was receiving a visitor.

"Master Jaylin Warnock of Atabyrion," Gislebertus said in a dramatic voice, "From His Majesty's Espion."

A swirl of gold-streaked hair came around in surprise and Jaylin was suddenly face-to-face with Princess Keyana. Her eyes had Jevin's coloring, a green-brown mix, like cat eyes. She had a soft shade of lip rouge that accentuated a lovely smile. She was smaller than he, almost a woman, but not quite. Her eyes were dangerous, so like Jevin's, and she smiled charmingly at him.

"This is Jaylin Warnock?" she said, blinking wide. "I was beginning to doubt you'd

survived your wounds. How I've wanted to meet you! Father, look who is here!"

Gislebertus shot Jaylin a dangerous look, but he ignored it and dropped to one knee. "The honor, Princess, is mine only. Had I heard of your beauty sooner, we would certainly have met." She took his hand and lifted him up as court etiquette called for. Her hand was warm and he thought she gave his a little squeeze. So she was a flirt.

Gislebertus coughed. "Master Warnock?" He drew Jaylin away from the princess, towards her father.

"My Sovereign." Jaylin bowed at the waist, reluctantly releasing her hand.

"So, you have not met my daughter Keyana before now? I'm surprised. She's a gossip of the worst sort." He gave her a wink. "I'm surprised indeed you managed to avoid her and the company of wagging tongues that follow her about. The prattling, I tell you, is *odious*."

"Father!"

Jaylin smiled at Davin-Noll. He was a man who spoke well to his friends, and blistered the air with oaths when he was angry. But he could see that the fondness he had for his daughter was legitimate.

"No, my sovereign. The blame is mine. Wounds prevented me from attending the last King's peace. You have sired beautiful children, my liege. To your credit." *And another one you do not yet know of…*

"Keyana is my firstborn," Davin-Noll said. "I never once wept that she was not a son."

Keyana joined him, weaving her arm into his and kissing his bristly beard.

"She is *betrothed* to the Mark of Morvenn," Gislebertus said.

"So young?" Jaylin said, though he was weary of the litany.

"Just a plight troth," Davin-Noll said, waving his hand. "They'll not wed until after I am gone." He chuckled and broke into another small coughing fit. It took a moment to quiet it. "What have you to say to me, Jaylin?"

"My Sovereign, when there is time, I would like to speak with you...briefly. I've returned from an important visit and would like to talk to you of it."

A look passed between them, and Jaylin felt the thunder hammering in the King's soul.

Davin-Noll's eyes lowered and his hand trembled. "Then we will speak at once. Come." He rose slowly from the throne, his steward supporting his arm, and then he stepped gingerly off the dais towards a privacy screen behind it.

Keyana fidgeted with a ring on her hand. "Will you save me a dance, Jaylin Warnock? I hear the Espion training is superb."

"A compliment, your Highness? Then I will save you two." He gave her a wink.

Gislebertus brushed by him, his shoulder gently nudging Jaylin's. "Shameless," he hissed in a tiny whisper.

Jaylin followed Davin-Noll. When they were safe behind the screen, the king seated himself on a wide bench, wincing as he did so, and offered Jaylin the place beside him. A wine stain on his tunic contrasted with the expense of the fabric and the gilt stitch work.

"Did you…did you manage to see her again?"

Jaylin felt the truth blister on his tongue. "Yes. I was in the Tier of Aster yesterday."

"She didn't agree to see me." His eyes looked down, his chest heaving. Jaylin controlled his expression. If Kalisha only knew how much she pained him. That a girl, a seamstress, a person of no account in all the Quaylon could make the Sovereign of Minya wilt with grief. The knowledge was dangerous.

"My lord, I think she is afraid to. She has started a new life there, and I believe that seeing

you may be too hard for her." Jaylin did not know what to say to offer comfort. But he had to try. "I did give her instructions on how to contact me at the King's Will if she changes her mind."

Davin-Noll looked up, hopeful, then sagged. "If she didn't agree yesterday, why would she change her mind?"

"I startled her," Jaylin said. "Give her time, and maybe she will. I know it's not much hope to cling to, but it's the truth." Jaylin smiled. "I do promise you though, my king, that I will keep contact with her and try to arrange an opportunity for the future. That is all I can do right now."

Davin-Noll nodded, and patted Jaylin's leg. "Well enough, Jaylin. Well enough, indeed." His hand trembled and he clenched it to hide the sign of weakness. "After reading the letter you brought me from her, those few months ago, I had the impression...she'd not be willing to see me again. At least, at least she is safe from Alvaron too."

"I believe so." Jaylin leaned forward. "Is there anything else I can do, my king?"

"Do you know how to find her...there in Aster?"

Jaylin hesitated.

"I would give a thousand dyx just to see her again. She'd not have to face me, to speak, for I know that would cause her pain. But if I could see her, one last time 'ere I die." He sighed, a long tremulous sigh. He turned to Jaylin, his eyes intense. "Is there no way you could do this?"

"I don't know, my lord. I just don't know. I'm sure Radamistus wants me dead."

"Hang Radamistus! Is it a matter of money? I would pay more," Davin-Noll's eyes glittered with emotion.

"If I can, I wouldn't do it for Minyan silver. It would be my favor, to you."

"Then what is the problem? I want to see her, Jaylin. Surely you can do something?"

"Perhaps an opportunity will present itself at the upcoming King's Will."

"I would like that," Davin-Noll said. "I have not been anticipating the long journey to Aster this year. But if I thought I could see Kalisha there, I will go..."

"I can only promise to try."

"Then that must be enough for me," Davin-Noll said. He rose wearily, his chest heaving. He staggered against the partition and paused, catching his breath. "I'll be fine," he said, waving the steward away when Gislebertus rushed to his side. He limped back to the ballroom, a strained smile etched on his mouth. Jaylin watched him climb the dais. Sweat glistened on his forehead.

"You've aggravated him," Gislebertus said in a low voice. He glanced over at Jaylin, his face hostile.

"You're starting to aggravate me," Jaylin said and crossed the ring of sentries again. One day he'd like to take the steward's quill and pop the vein protruding from his forehead. Maneuvering through the crowds, he searched the massive hall for something to cheer him when he saw Princess Keyana. He spotted her dancing wildly with Guyaume Reim. The head of the Espion looked distracted though, kept glancing around as if searching for someone.

Jaylin lifted a cup of mead from a servant rushing by, and he sipped it as he sauntered around the hall to where the Gypsy king lingered with a small crowd. Vorelann Torix stood nearly a head taller than the men he was with, and his laugh was deep and rich as it carried over their heads.

Vorelann was dressed in Minyan clothes, a colored tunic bearing Jevin's badge. He also wore a ceremonial saber, jeweled and tied fashionably with a mercy knot. His boots were soft cowhide and he wore black billowing pants. His build intimidated, for he was tall but also sinewy, like a mountain lion. He had an easy laugh, but as Jaylin approached he saw eyes that

were dark as pitch and twinkled with ire, a chained fury his smile held bound.

"Well, if you must know," Vorelann confided to one of the guards posted near him, "I've always cared for spiced mead. In truth man! Granted, it may still taste like goat piss when compared to our bitter wine, but I have developed a taste for it."

"How long did it take?" the guard challenged, but he was also smiling.

"The moment the queen poured me a glass," he said ruefully and winked. The sentries burst out laughing, all except one, who glared at the Gypsy king with contempt. "I was forever taken with her favorite drink." He raised a cup to his mouth and swallowed. But his eyes, Jaylin saw, his eyes were mocking them. Mocking their laughter.

"Of course you'd say that, Vorelann," the disgruntled soldier said. "You've been hot after her since you came to Premye. It must be trite sad, in truth, for a man who only has his daughter's baldric on which to tote his scabbard."

The men quieted at once, their eyes turning fearfully to the Gypsy king. The cup froze at Vorelann's lips, and his eyes burned with murder. He lowered the cup, a half-smile hovering on his lips. "At least I don't hang mine on stable sheep, Lushian," he said. The other sentries grimaced and then fits and sniggers broke out. Lushian went red to the roots, his face flaming.

"Anyone who questions my manhood," Lushian seethed, "Need only draw his own sword."

Vorelann looked him up and down contemptuously and then broke out laughing. "By the Veil, Lushian! You look as wroth as the lad after chugging spoiled milk! Learn to recognize a joke when it is laid at your feet. This is a ball, not a war."

"Yet," Lushian said in disgust and stormed off.

"Don't mind him, Vorelann," one of the other soldiers coaxed. "He ate a bad turnip this morning."

"A bushel full, I'd think," the Gypsy king quipped. He glanced at Jaylin's approach and he turned to him. "Quiet lads," he said, pretending to be solemn. "We might be overheard by Jevin's spies." Jaylin was amused, for all the sentries wore Jevin's tabard and badge. He smiled at Jaylin and nodded. "Welcome to my Court, my good man. Come... share a drink with us."

Jaylin looked at the girl next to the Gypsy king. Her eyes were blazingly dark with dark shards of color in them. Her jaw was clenched with rage, and he could see her digging her nails into her palms. She wore a Gypsy gown, one obviously out of fashion at the Premyen Ball. He could tell she did so deliberately. Her swell of midnight hair was held back by a single green scarf, a color matching some of the colors in the gown. Her gaze was leveled at the floor, at Jaylin's boots.

"Thank you, I will," Jaylin said. "But please, calling me a spy is insulting. I'm more of a...supervisor. Keeping everyone else in line. Besides, you don't want to offend your new guest, do you? I will be visiting Rad-Nym soon."

Vorelann tipped his cup Jaylin's way. "I beg your pardon if I offended you, friend. I never intended it." His eyes twinkled the opposite, though. "A new tenant at Rad-Nym? What did you possibly do so wrong as to deserve such a boring duty?"

"Well, I'm sure Jevin wants me there to get information from you. Why else?"

"Naturally. Rad-Nym is, after all, the ideal place to carry on secret correspondence with rebel gypsies from Infidel." The sentries around him chuckled with delight. "Allow me to introduce my gaolers: Nimrose, Hatby, Parsellant, and Grey. The constipated one over there is Lushian." His grin was infectious.

"I'm charmed," Jaylin said, nodding to each of them, except the sulking Lushian. He took a short swallow from his cup. "You know, I'm certain my assignment has something to do with

the upcoming revolution and all, though personally...” Jaylin paused and stared at Vorelann's daughter, “I have other motives for being at Rad-Nym.” He turned back to the Gypsy king. “I confess though that I will enjoy your company equally well. It's not often I get to share cells with one of Jevin's...'guests'.” He took another sip. “Or do I misspeak?”

“Not at all,” Vorelann said, his eyes shining. “I think the term 'guest' is an appropriate word. I've heard correctly then about your Atabyrion candor, Jaylin Warnock. Let me be equally frank. You are welcome to my kingdom, such as it is at Rad-Nym. You are free to roam in any room you choose, read any parcel of mail I receive, or ask any question you deserve. I hold no secrets. Jevin and I are allies, in the truest sense of the word. He may lack trust in me, but I have not breached our peace.” He smiled, his teeth white. Jaylin suspected, though, that he was a very accomplished liar. His words rang true, but his eyes did not. “Since you've already taken such an interest in my daughter, I would be honored to introduce you. Jaylin, this is Atayika.”

Her gaze burned with fury, but it was fixed at his boots. She had an elusive fragrance about her, the hint of some perfume Jaylin did not recognize. Her jaw was clenched shut, and so she curtseyed respectfully to Jaylin, but did not speak.

“So, my Lady,” Jaylin said to her, “Do you hold so much contempt for my boots, or are my scars really as horrible as my friend Thasos says?”

“Be polite, Atayika,” Vorelann said softly, squeezing her arm. “Jaylin is our guest.”

She lifted her head and glared openly at Jaylin, her chin jutting out just a little. “You are welcome to our home, Espion.” She almost spat the words.

Jaylin kept his expression carefully neutral, with the hint of a smile. It felt like she had just spit on him. “I must give you credit on your gown, Atayika. It looks wonderful on you, and it definitely pushes the bounds of Premye fashion. I approve.”

She stepped forward, her gaze meeting his. “Are you mocking my clothes, Espion?”

“Atayika,” Vorelann said.

“Not at all,” Jaylin said as sincerely as he could muster in the face of open contempt. “I like it very well, in fact. If it's not too unpleasant a thought, may I beg a dance from you?”

Her eyes flashed, and then smoldered. He knew he had struck her and caused pain, but he had no idea how. “You may beg to your god, Aster, and you'd beg in vain!”

Jaylin shrugged and retreated a step. “Well, we'll be seeing a lot of each other. This certainly won't be my last chance.”

Vorelann pitched his words low. “*Ixten vol torrenshta, Atayika. Vol torrenshta.*” He returned Jaylin’s stare. “I apologize for my daughter’s rudeness. I’m afraid she came here much against her will. She is a very good dancer, but she refuses to learn the Premyen ones.” He stroked her silky hair. “Forgive her youth. I thought she was old enough to come to a ball. Mayhap I was wrong this time.”

Jaylin watched her flinch and then her gaze went down to the floor, and he saw thick tears pool on her lashes. His rebuke had been gentle, but her shoulders sagged and she finally relaxed her clenched fists.

Vorelann raised the tenor of his voice. “You are welcome to return with us to Rad-Nym, Master Warnock. I will have a room prepared for you. Or if you have other plans for this evening...?”

“That depends on how the night proceeds, but I did have one question for you, Vorelann Torix.” He watched the Gypsy king for his reaction. “How goes your business in the Tier of the Infidel?”

Vorelann shrugged, didn't seem at all surprised by the question. “I have not been to the

Tier of the Infidel since the Surrender, three years ago. I have no business in that Tier. Why? Do you?"

*You are good,* Jaylin thought. There was nothing in Vorelann's eyes, no hint at his feelings. He was a man with great self-control. "Not if Jevin has his way. But I've been hoping for a visit there." He winked. "I just need to find a way to visit without getting killed."

"You don't exactly look like a gypsy, Jaylin. I understand your concern. Well, if you can arrange it with Prince Jevin, I would be pleased to escort you there and give you a personal tour. And I promise not to kill you."

Jaylin smiled. *I'm sure you would keep that promise and not kill me yourself.* "Were you planning on staying here a while?"

"We serve the King's pleasure, naturally. We *patiently* serve the King's pleasure. We stay until we're dismissed, Jaylin. You see, if I left early, Jevin would spoil his appetite worrying what mischief I was up to. I am here as much for his peace of mind as anyone else's. Or is that too blunt?"

"It's not possible to be too blunt with me. I do have a few people I would like to see tonight, but I would enjoy returning with your escort, if the situation permits it."

"We'll await you then."

"I am anticipating my stay at Rad-Nym...may I call you Vorelann?"

The Gypsy king nodded. "I've been called much worst than that, Jaylin. You may also call me 'Your Eminence' as well, but we'll save that for more formal occasions." He gave Jaylin a playful wink.

By the Veil, but he's a likeable fellow…

Jaylin turned to Atayika. Her fury seemed to have cooled, and she did glance up at him once before looking away. "My Lady, I hope you will believe me when I say that you have brightened this ball considerably with your attendance. Since you don't like Premyen dances, perhaps you will teach me some of your Gypsy dances on a separate occasion. It would please me to learn one. In Atabyrion, we dance with our hearts."

She flinched at his request. "If my lord father wishes it," she whispered.

Vorelann frowned and tapped his black moustache. His eyebrows furrowed. "Impossible. No, I'm afraid that would be too controversial, Jaylin. The Gypsy king's daughter and an Espion doing a Gypsy dance at the King's ball?" He couldn't hold the stern expression any longer and started chuckling. "By Fate, I would love to see that! We'll have them all drinking sour wine by spring!"

"Father!"

Jaylin excused himself politely and left, still chuckling to himself. He mulled over the Torix family. What had Jevin assigned him to do? Gain their trust? He had never met a more wary man. A man who could mock with a look as well as an oiled comment. Jaylin searched the hall briefly and spied Thasos with Queen Keyana. He held the stem of a wine cup, his other arm positioned behind his back in a dignified angle. Jaylin ventured away, listening as another tree-dance started. He glanced through the dancers and caught a flash of crimson. He smiled. Weaving through the intricate dancers, Jaylin approached the eldest daughter of the sovereign after depositing his cup on a servant's tray.

"My Lady?" he said, interrupting her partner mid-sentence. "I believe I promised you a dance this evening."

"Who are you?" her partner said with a look of annoyance. Jaylin saw the rings on his hands, the knotted blade and realized he had interrupted someone of no less rank than a mark.

*Brilliant, Jaylin. As if you didn't have enough enemies.*

Keyana smiled as she extracted herself from her partner, then took Jaylin's arm and tugged him deeper into the ballroom floor. "That is right. Excuse me, Silas." She sidestepped any rebuttal by taking Jaylin's hand and swinging about in a wide circle, making her skirts fan and sway. The tree-dance took little agility and practice, but it was good for private conversation since the partners were exclusive throughout the dance. Jaylin noticed again the warmth of her hand.

"That was the Mark of Morvenn, wasn't it?"

"Yes, and thank you. I was about to be bored witless by another tale of his military campaign during the last Gypsy War. Tonight I would much rather be entertained by stories of *your* exploits."

"There are so many after all..."

She flashed a dazzling smile and followed the tree-dance routine. Her smile was like wine. "I have heard many stories about you, Jaylin Warnock, but they cannot all be true. So, to satisfy my curiosity and to keep Silas from interrupting us, we must keep talking as fast as we can. Is it true that you dove off of Runner's Bridge?"

"That one happens to be true. I don't know which was more foolish, jumping off the bridge to keep from getting caught, or going down into the sewers to avoid the same fate. Working for your uncle is a dangerous career, Keyana."

"Yes, but isn't that why you joined the Espion? You hardly could expect it to be as dull as working in dog kennels or for a butcher."

" I thought it was all about uncovering seedy acts of treason." It was a strange way to begin a conversation with someone he'd never met before that night. She had obviously heard a great deal about him, but he knew nothing about her and was determined to remedy it. Any good Espion would. "But what about you, my fair Princess of Minya? What of your exploits here in the Tier of Premye?"

"My exploits?" Her eyes flashed mischievously as he whirled her around again. "What has Thasos told you about me, the brute!"

She was good at evading questions. Jaylin gave her a little wink. "I hardly think that someone with your flair and personality wouldn't get into a little...mischief."

"Did Thasos ever tell you about the day I caught him bathing in the queen's chambers?" Jaylin blinked with surprise and she smiled again. "I guess not. Ask him about it. See if he still blushes! I was only ten...but it left quite an impression on me."

"I'm sure it would."

"Of Atabyrion modesty, you brute! He covered himself so fast I hardly had the chance to see anything interesting."

"Where was your mother, may I ask?"

"In the Tier of Median. You have quite an imagination, Jaylin."

As he turned her around again, he saw the Mark of Morvenn glaring at him. Jaylin smirked—he couldn't help it. "Is your Silas really as exciting as he seems? Or are all the marks of Premye that bloated with self importance? You'd think I was ravishing you, the way he is staring at us."

"He'll mend," she said, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. He twirled her again and she returned close enough to drop a whisper. "I've pressed Uncle Jevin to let me join the Espion…"

"And I've always refused," Jevin said in a return whisper over Jaylin's other shoulder. Keyana gasped with delight and threw herself into Jevin's arms, giving him a playful kiss on the

cheek.

"You always sneak up on me!" she said, but her eyes were delighted. "Uncle, I've been having the most wonderful conversation. Why do you keep him down in the Tier of Minya when he's much better suited for work up here?"

"Half the hall has noticed his work," Jevin said, his grin and sense of humor unmistakable. "Which is why I came to rescue him from your advances. Or vice versa?" He looked at Jaylin quizzically, his eyebrow arching. "No, it is wisdom that I've kept you two apart 'ere this. You're kindred spirits, shameless in conduct, and the King's Will gets unruly with too many scandals."

Jaylin belted out a hearty laugh, enough to draw extra stares. The Mark of Morvenn turned purple with anxiety. "Oh come, Jevin. The King's Will can cope with a few new scandals." He turned and gave Keyana a bow. "Besides, how can I resist the beauty and charm of one such as Princess Keyana?" Jevin eyes narrowed and a tight line etched into his mouth. It was an Espion order to stand down, a sign that meant Jevin had news for him. Jaylin dropped the bravado, but kept a half-smile. "Perhaps you are right. The dance floor at the King's Ball is not the best of places to carry on. My Lady," he turned and bowed low, the deep grace befitting a queen, "it has been my great honor and privilege to acquaint myself with you this evening. May it not be our only moment before cruel Fate separates us again."

Keyana gave a graceful curtsy in return. "Believe me, Master Warnock—it will not be."

Jaylin turned back to Jevin. "Shall we talk, my prince?"

"I had hoped we could before the night ended." Jevin beckoned Jaylin towards a private screening nearby and allowed Jaylin to move first. As he passed by, the prince turned to Keyana. "Perhaps you should save the last few dances for your betrothed, Keyana."

"I will," she replied, her voice steady. "But I shall save the last one for you, Uncle Jevin. If you can spare me a moment tonight."

"For you," Jevin said with a twist of a smile, "anything." He bowed and then followed Jaylin to the wooden partition hiding them from the eyes of those at the ball.

Jaylin sighed. Not only was she a beauty, she could put a man easily at ease. That was rare for someone her age, which was really not much younger than he was. Flirting with her was dangerous though, but the kind of danger that thrilled. Was she someone to be trusted, though? She had Jevin's eyes, eyes that were difficult to read. But he could sense in them more than just a casual flirtation. She had gone after him like a hawk, knowing that her mother and father would undoubtedly object to her dancing so openly with a member of the Espion. Why risk their anger? Perhaps her desire to join the Espion was part of it. She had obviously been anxious to meet him since the day he'd announced himself at the King's Will and denounced her other uncle, the Mark of Alvaron.

Jaylin rubbed his chin. Being the queen's daughter, he had assumed her loyalties rested with Jorganon. Yet Jevin was her uncle too. Had she chosen her father's side over her mother's? It made an interesting thought, one he was anxious to pursue.

In the privacy behind the fluted scrollwork of the wooden screen, Jevin folded his arms. "The next time I invite you to the King's ball, I believe I'm going to keep you on a leash. But then, I do not need to tell you that you made a stir already."

"It was just a dance, Jevin."

"Just a dance? Then why have I heard suspicions rumored three times already this evening that Princess Keyana has taken you for a lover and that you meet in secret trysts outside the King's balcony window."

"Why stop there?" Jaylin said, shrugging. "We make love in your City Room each high

moon." He chuckled. "People talk, Jevin. I don't really care what they say. I've never even met the girl before. You know that."

"I normally don't care either. Rumors wag on people's tongues in a thousand shades of deceit. If you only knew half the ones they tell about me! But as one of my Espion, I would advise caution with Keyana. Jealousy is not a logical emotion, and I'd hate to see you defending yourself against the Mark of Morvenn." He paused and then chuckled. "I daresay I don't need to lecture you like an errant child. You follow your own counsel, as you always do. I sought to make you aware of the political undercurrents in the water you're swimming in."

"And I appreciate that, as always, my prince. I apologize if I embarrassed you. What news?"

"I noticed you talking with Vorelann. As you've seen for yourself, Atayika can be quite a wasp. I don't think I've coaxed a civilized word from her since she came to the Tier of Premye three years ago. Do you intend on staying at Rad-Nym until we leave for the King's Will? Guyaume Reim is calling an Espion meeting tomorrow to discuss our transport to Aster...in light of what happened on Runner's Bridge yesterday. Any thoughts?"

"I suppose I did make it a little difficult for Espion to cross into Aster," Jaylin said and rubbed his chin. "I will think on it. It is a shame the sewers don't go into Aster!"

"No, Jaylin, I'm not worried about the Espion being allowed at the King's Will. The Deconeus is insistent, but he's not stupid. He knows that when Guyaume and I attend, we are sure to bring our people. He just makes sure they never leave the island without Nasturtium escorts."

"Well, as to your Gypsy king and his daughter. I am extremely intrigued by this assignment, Jevin. I like Vorelann. He has a unique way about him."

Jevin brushed a crumb from his doublet. "That I know. His people nearly murdered him when he surrendered, but it was the only way to stop the war peacefully. I had him caged with my armies, but it would have caused tremendous bloodshed if we'd fought to the end. But I still have the suspicion he is only biding his time."

"I do feel sorry for those idiots guarding him, though." Jaylin sighed, shaking his head.

"His tongue, perchance?"

"They have no idea that he mocks them with every word and gesture. But his daughter, now there's a rare beauty. You mark my words, Jevin, I will find a way to crack her."

The prince shook his head sadly. "When pigs fly, Jaylin. She's a gypsy to the core, and she'll never trust you. She reminds me of a goshawk. You know the kind? They'd sever their legs with their beaks rather than being tethered. You never tame goshawks, Jaylin. You break them. Will you be returning to my manor this evening, or did you...?"

"I was planning on returning to Rad-Nym with the Torixes tonight. Will there be a problem with that? I'm looking forward to speaking at length with Vorelann. I'm very good at asking questions. If he's hiding something, he'll let it slip eventually."

"Excellent. I'd prefer you stay at Rad-Nym, especially before the departure. I don't think I'd trust bringing Vorelann to the King's Will, not being so near the Tier of the Infidel. But then I need you at the King's Will with me too. Get to know them. Then give me your suggestion whether he'd be more dangerous in Premye without us, or in Aster with us. I'll trust your judgment."

"Very well," Jaylin replied, nodding. "Is that all? I'd like to stay a little while longer this evening."

"Certainly." Jevin glanced past the partition, gave a brief nod, and then turned back to

Jaylin. “But there is someone here I promised to introduce to you. Jaylin Warnock, meet Moira, the Markess of Croy.”

Jevin gave him a grin of triumph and a wink before abandoning him to the markess.

*A writer since high school, Jeff Wheeler published a fantasy children’s story, The Wishing Lantern, in 1999. He was born in New Jersey but grew up in Silicon Valley in California. He attended San Jose State University and graduated with a bachelor’s and master’s degree in medieval History. He continued his education and completed an MBA in 2001. He and his wife Gina currently reside in Rocklin, CA. They have three children. He welcomes reader feedback at his blog site IDUMEA: www.jeff-wheeler.com.*

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